1-1-2005

Disrupting dissemblance : transgressive black women as politics of counter-representation in African American women's fiction/

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DISRUPTING DISSEMBLANCE: TRANSGRESSIVE BLACK WOMEN AS POLITICS OF COUNTER-REPRESENTATION IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S FICTION

A Dissertation Presented

by

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Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2005

W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies

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For my mother Ramona Ann Howard Melancon —
my model, my sustaining cup

and

Ida Mary Oliver Howard (1927-1999),
my maternal grandmother,
who never ceases to inspire me

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Expressing one's appreciation should never be a meaningless task but, rather, a moment filled with heartfelt sincerity. I have been, throughout the course of this process, and especially during the stages of dissertation writing, fortunate to have been surrounded by individuals who have supported me on multiple levels. I would be remiss if I did not express my gratitude to each of them.

I thank my family, first and foremost, for their unyielding love and support, which have sustained me throughout this endeavor. My parents Sterling and Ramona (Howard) Melancon, especially, have never lost faith in my ability to not only succeed triumphantly, but were, during times of distress and temporary "immobilization," unceasing in their encouragement, optimism, and selfless support. Words cannot even begin to express my profound love for and gratitude to them. I thank my older sisters Drs. Trina and Trichelle Melancon who, in having professional degrees in fields in which African American women are overwhelmingly under-represented, have invalidated stereotypes and served as both personal and professional models for me. My younger sister Trichlyn possesses a combination of vibrance, resilience, intelligence, and drive that not only inspires me, but assures me that she will succeed in all

the endeavors her promising future holds. Also, my baby-nephews Shaun, Sterling Ramon, and Aaron have always provided warm, pleasant, and welcomed "distractions" from the tediousness and rigidity of writing; I love and thank them dearly.

In the academic realm, I am especially grateful to the cadre of scholars/intellectuals/academicians I am privileged to refer to collectively as my committee: James Smethurst, Esther Terry, John Bracey, Andrea Rushing, and Paula Giddings. Throughout this process, they have been generous with their support, knowledge, and attention to this project. Invaluable were the enthusiasm, accessibility, and optimism of my advisor James Smethurst, who never doubted my intelligence or ability to succeed. Esther Terry, while meeting the demands of heading the department and serving as Vice Chancellor, was always supportive and accessible, and has served as a model of protocol and professionalism. John Bracey expressed interest in my project at its inception, always encouraging me to write in ways that affirmed my feminist politics and ideologies. Especially instrumental during the initial stages, Andrea Rushing helped usher this project from something abstract and conceptual to something written and tangible. Lastly, Paula Giddings has always expressed interest in and enthusiasm

about my dissertation, insisting that I articulate my ideas in complex, succinct, and complicated ways. I thank her for serving not only as a mentor, but model of modesty, brilliance, and scholarship.

I have been fortunate to have had additional intellectual and professional mentors. Carole Bencich has been a pleasant and vibrant spirit, forever exuding remarkable dedication to, as well as enthusiasm about, the art of teaching. I especially thank Mary Helen Washington for her academic support and investment in me; I am proud to be her student and am, needless to say, a better scholar and intellectual in part because of her.

Special thanks go to the personal and/or professional friends who, as kindred spirits, have helped make this journey not just endurable but pleasant. Words (at least none in the English language) cannot even begin to express the profundity of my thanks to Sandra Duvivier, my *marassa*, who has been generous with her encouragement and support; her friendship has comforted me during the most challenging times and is truly priceless. Also, I thank Tina Alpough, Jamie Gray, Calandra Tate, Letitia Thompson, and Jessica Nelson for quarter-lifelong friendships that have provided me with a more balanced, pleasurable, and humor-filled existence outside the academy.

Last but not least, I extend my gratitude to the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies, as well as the Social Science Research Council and the Andrew W. Mellon, Woodrow Wilson, Ford, and Nellie Mae Foundations, whose financial support helped alleviate the financial burden of graduate school, thereby enabling me to learn, conduct research, and write more freely and comfortably. ... If there is glory, I know to whom it belongs.

ABSTRACT

DISRUPTING DISSEMBLANCE: TRANSGRESSIVE BLACK WOMEN AS POLITICS OF COUNTER-REPRESENTATION IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S FICTION

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My dissertation examines post-civil rights novels by Toni Morrison, Ann Allen Shockley, and Alice Walker, and investigates their subversion of myopic representations of black women in the American literary and cultural imagination. More precisely, this study examines these writers' characterizations of black women who not only diverge from stereotypical images imposed by ideologies of "whiteness," but who also rebel unapologetically against constructions of female identity imposed by nationalist discourse generally and black nationalism particularly.

Drawing upon black feminist theoretical frameworks, performance theory, and postmodernist notions, this study analyzes these characters' transgressive behavior, specifically with regards to their sexuality, as, in part, a means to create a modern identity. While these notions have been

engaged in non-literary texts that explicate how race and nationalism construct gender roles, they have been largely understudied in black women's fiction. This dissertation seeks to establish, then, a nexus in which literary texts, movement ideologies, and politics of identity and representation meet to provide an interdisciplinary and broad discursive framework.

Organized conceptually, this study explores the aesthetics of transgression in an introduction, four representative chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter One introduces and situates transgressive black women characters within both the African American literary tradition and particular socio-cultural, historical, and political contexts. Chapter Two analyzes Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), and examines the protagonist Sula, who emblematizes transgressive behavior, as subverting the "classical black female script." Foregrounding politics of sexuality, Chapter Three employs Shockley's *Loving Her* (1974) and investigates the ways Shockley's black female protagonist Renay, via her interracial same-gender loving relationship, transgresses essentialist binaries regarding blackness, same-sex desire, and homosexuality.

Exploring the dialectics of transgression and belonging, Chapter Four examines Alice Walker's *Meridian* and ana-

lyzes the ways Meridian Hill transgresses circumscriptions for women, while concomitantly playing a participatory activist role in various communities. And, reemphasizing the potential of this study, the concluding chapter illustrates this project's centrality to African American and American literature, African American and American Studies, and Women's and Gender Studies.

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INTRODUCTION

DISRUPTING DISSEMBLANCE: TRANSGRESSIVE BLACK WOMEN AS POLITICS OF COUNTER-REPRESENTATION IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S FICTION

I've stayed in the front yard all my life.
I want a peek at the back

...

[...] Honest, I do.
And I'd like to be a bad woman, too,
And wear the brave stockings of night-black lace
And strut down the streets with paint on my face.[1]

In her salient essay on the "culture of dissemblance," black feminist historian Darlene Clark Hine describes "dissemblance" as the self-imposed secrecy surrounding black women's interiority, specifically their sexuality, that protects the sanctity of their inner lives.[2] "What I propose," argues Hine, "is that in the face of the pervasive stereotypes and negative estimations of the sexuality of black women, it was imperative that they collectively create alternative self-images" to "shield from scrutiny these private, empowering definitions of self."[3] While Hine lo-

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[1] Gwendolyn Brooks, "a song in the front yard," *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World, 2001), 28.

[2] Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New, 1995), 380-387.

[3] Hine, 383.

cates this strategy within a particular historical juncture, it is a phenomenon that, extending beyond its historical specificity, informs African American women writers' characterizations of black women and, as such, has been deeply entrenched in their fiction.[4] What I find particularly engaging and, thereby, forms the basis of this dissertation is the ways in which some African American women novelists of the post-civil rights era disrupt this traditional dissemblance surrounding black women's racial identity, sexuality, and representation.[5]

Historically, a relationship between black people, representation, and political subjectivity has always existed, yet has been more pronounced during particular historical moments. During the late nineteenth- and early

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[4] In Hine's delineation of dissemblance, she describes it as having occurred during the early twentieth-century, particularly during the Great Migration. While she discusses it within geographical specificity as a phenomenon within mid-western United States, it was a practice/strategy that occurred among black women nationally.

[5] While Hine's use of dissemblance applies to the secrecy surrounding black women's sexuality, I use the term more broadly to discuss racial identity, black female sexuality, and the politics of representation because of the interplay among these apparatuses. After all, black women's deployment of respectability and propriety, coupled with a rhetoric of moral superiority, was one of the means by which they not only protected themselves from sexual violation but, of equal import, participated in racial uplift and socio-communal advancement. For extended discussions, see Beverly Guy-Sheftall's *Words of Fire*; and Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham's *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993).

twentieth-centuries, African Americans, having been negatively stereotyped within a (white) racially hegemonic society, were relegated to an "inferior" status and, thereby, deemed "ineligible" for full civic and political rights. As a conduit by which to counter ubiquitous negative images of them and secure socio-political and economic subjectivity, African Americans, largely under the influence of black intellectuals and activists, began to adhere to certain codes of conduct, namely respectability and propriety, to redefine themselves and the race through empowering acts of self-definition and determination.

While such strategies affected the black community collectively, it had its most pronounced effects, arguably, on black women, who, having been characterized as licentious and hypersexual---as antitheses to "ideal" (white) womanhood---were perceived as responsible for so-called black deviancy and pathology. In light of this and black women's sexual violation by white men especially during slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow---and their putative sexual lasciviousness serving as rationale or justification for such crimes---black women embraced respectability and dissemblance as protection and counter-representation. Furthermore, their deployment of propriety and a rhetoric of moral superiority helped counter prevailing images of

black women particularly and African Americans generally. As such, their comportment and display of "respectable" behavior served not only as forms of counter-representation, but also racial uplift and advancement. These very notions of female behavioral codes and a "politics of silence" surrounding black women's sexuality are inscribed and enacted in the literature of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black women writers.

Unlike most of their literary predecessors---whose characterizations of black women foregrounded respectability, dissemblance, or a "politics of silence" to promote racial uplift and advancement---black women novelists in the post-sixties period negotiate the inherent tension between being communal symbols of Victorian propriety and expressing their individuality in a postmodern society.[6] The medium or trope by which these writers negotiate this ten-

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[6] Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham uses "politics of silence" interchangeably with dissemblance, "African-American Women's History and the Meta-language of Race," *Signs* 17.2 (1992): 266. Refer to previous endnote for discussion of "dissemblance". For extended discussions of early twentieth-century black women writers and their representations of black women characters, see Barbara Christian's *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985; New York: Teachers College, 1997); Claudia Tate's *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992); and Deborah E. McDowell's "'The Changing Same': Generational Connections and Black Women Novelists---*Iola Leroy* and *The Color Purple*" in *"The Changing Same": Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995), 34 - 57.

sion, I argue, is through what I identify as *transgressive* black women characters, whose various enactments of recalcitrance and (mis)conduct defy communal sanctions, especially regarding female behavior, and problematize notions of a unitary black community. To this end, these characters, as their authors intend, illustrate the inefficacy of dissemblance as a viable conduit for black socio-political advancement in a postmodern period.

Analyzing selected novels by Toni Morrison, Ann Allen Shockley, and Alice Walker, this dissertation investigates how these writers---informed by and in direct response to the political struggles of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s---disrupt black women's dissemblance, as well as myopic representations of them in the American literary and cultural imagination.[7] More precisely, it examines the ways in which these writers characterize black women who diverge not only from stereotypical images imposed by discourses of "whiteness," but also rebel unapologetically against constructions of female identity imposed by nationalist discourse in general and black nationalism in particular. For, in their revolt against essentialized or fixed images of black

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[7] The political struggles to which I refer are the Civil Rights, Black Power, Black Arts/Aesthetics, Women's Rights, and Gay Liberation movements.

women, or what I call the "classical black female script," these writers reconceptualize black womanhood in liberatory and transformative ways: through their creation of transgressive black women characters.

By "transgressive" I mean those unmediated performances, enactments, or instantiations of (mis)behavior characterized by a deliberate violation of racial, gender, sexual, moral, and/or socio-communal boundaries, whereby the enactor transcends, if not subverts, established normative and acceptable behavior.[8] As such, these characters, in their deliberate (mis)conduct, are radical agents who depart unapologetically from proscriptive social and socio-communal definitions of black womanhood that frame the classical black female script: that is, black women's expected racial loyalty and solidarity, sexual fidelity to black men, self-abnegation, and the idealization of marriage and motherhood.[9]

The script is (in)formed at the interface of the overarching ideologies of the "cult of true womanhood"---with

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[8] My theorization of transgressive is informed, in part, by Michel Foucault's conceptualizations of transgression. See Foucault's "A Preface to Transgression," *The Essential Foucault*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: New, 1994), 442-457.

[9] My concept of the "classical black female script" builds, in part, upon Deborah McDowell's assessment of how women are "classically defined". See "Boundaries: Or Distant Relations and Close Kin---*Sula*" in "*The Changing Same*," 109.

principles of piety, sexual purity, submissiveness, and domesticity---and culturally specific tenets of uplift and obligatory service propounded by black nationalism in particular and nationalist discourse in general.[10] In fact, it is precisely because these characters "violate" socially- and communally-mandated codes of conduct---in their noncompliance with dominant ideologies governing womanhood, and nationalist tenets regarding the role of women in the "nation"---that their (mis)behavior is perceived as threatening to community mores and aspirations. As such, their private transgressions serve not simply as personal but so-

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[10] For extensive discussions of the "cult of true womanhood," see Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1976), 21-41; also Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987). Carby examines the cultural and political impact of the "cult of true womanhood" on representations of black women in abolitionist literature, as well as the ways in which these ideologies informed black women's display of propriety and respectability after the cult of true womanhood was no longer "the dominant ideological code."

For scholarship on the gender politics of black nationalism, see Patricia Hill Collins's "When Fighting Words Are Not Enough: The Gendered Content of Afrocentricism," *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998), 155-183; Wahneema Lubiano's "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense: Policing Ourselves and Others," *The House That Race Built* (1997; New York: Vintage, 1998), 232-252; and Joyce Hope Scott's "From Foreground to Margin: Female Configurations and Masculine Self-Representations in Black Nationalist Fiction," *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, eds. Andrew Parker, et al. (New York: Routledge; 1992), 296-312. For discussions of how gender informs nationalism at large, see *Of Property and Propriety: The Role of Gender and Class in Imperialism and Nationalism*, eds. Himani Bannerji, Shahrzad Mojab, and Judith Whitehead (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2001); also *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, ed. Tamar Mayer (London: Routledge, 2000).

ciopolitical insurgence---thereby collapsing dichotomous constructions of the private/public sphere.

Drawing upon black feminist theoretical frameworks, performance theory, and postmodernist notions, this study analyzes these characters transgressive behavior, particularly in regard to their sexuality, as, in part, a means to create a modern identity. While such notions have been engaged in non-literary texts that explicate how race and nationalism construct gender roles, they have been largely understudied in black women's fiction.[11] This dissertation seeks to establish, then, a nexus in which literary texts, movement ideologies, and politics of identity and representation meet to provide an interdisciplinary and broad discursive framework.

Because transgressive behavior is neither transhistorical nor static, and individuals behave transgressively in myriad ways, my dissertation centers around selected novels that foreground black women characters who participate in certain acts of transgression: adultery, interracial sex, promiscuity, and/or same-gender loving. Organized conceptually, this study delineates and explores the

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[11] An exception to this neglect is Madhu Dubey's *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994).

aesthetics of transgression in an Introduction, four chapters, and a Conclusion. Chapter One introduces transgressive black women characters, and situates them within both the African American literary tradition and particular socio-cultural, historical, and political contexts. Chapter Two analyzes Morrison's *Sula* (1973), and examines the novel's protagonist Sula Mae Peace, who transgresses every tenet of the classical black female script, as "new world black" and "new world woman"---the quintessential transgressive black woman of postmodern African American women's fiction.[12] Foregrounding politics of sexuality and same-gender loving, Chapter Three employs Shockley's *Loving Her* (1974) to investigate the ways in which her black female protagonist, via her interracial same-gender loving relationship, transgresses essentialist binaries that categorize homosexuality, homoeroticism, and same-sex desire within a non-black (or otherwise "white") context, as well as resist reductive categorizations based on sexuality.

Chapter Four analyzes Alice Walker's *Meridian* to explore the ways in which Meridian Hill transgresses circum-

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[12] For the context of Sula as "new world black and new world woman," see Toni Morrison's "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke UP, 1994), 390.

scriptions for women, while concomitantly playing a revolutionary activist role within various communities. And, re-emphasizing the potential of this study, the concluding chapter illustrates this project's centrality to African American and American literature, African American and American Studies, and Women's and Gender Studies. For, in its examination of the junctures and disjunctures surrounding racial identity, black women's sexuality, and the politics of representation, this study provides scholars with new ways to further examine and deconstruct black womanhood in/and the "nation" in potentially revolutionary and progressive frameworks.

CHAPTER I

CREATING SPACES, OVERSTEPPING BOUNDARIES: TRANSGRESSIVE BLACK WOMEN AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION

Be nobody's darling
Be an outcast.
Take the contradictions
Of your life
And wrap around
You like a shawl,
...
To keep you warm.[1]

Black women's lives and experiences have always been fraught with contradictions and complexities. Yet, representations of them in American literature and culture have not always reflected their multiplicity, range, and profundity, nor have these representations always foregrounded interlocking factors---race, gender, sexuality, class, and culture---affecting them. Instead, a barrage of hackneyed images of black women---from mammies to matriarchs, concubines to castrators, tragic mulattos to jezebels, and black queens to "Mother Earths"---have long persisted, sedimenting themselves deeply and problematically within the historical and cultural memories of America.

Resisting monolithic and essentialized notions of black womanhood, some post-civil rights African American

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[1] Alice Walker, *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973).

women writers limn various complex, multidimensional characters that neither fit nor valorize mythical and romanticized images of black women. Refusing to simply relegate black female characters to domestic roles, subordinate them to men, or further mythologize them as do most of their male and white female counterparts, these authors create characters that not only challenge the way we conceptualize "woman," but also expand, complicate, and revolutionize limited constructions of black womanhood. For, rather than create "positive role models" or perpetuate paradigmatic images of black women as asexual, sanctified, domineering maternal figures; overly-sexualized, evil castrating bitches; or, highly-victimized and sacrificial "mules uh de world," these writers, as literary and cultural revisionists, refute such erroneous and pervasive stereotypes. They create, instead, *transgressive* black women characters who do not merely survive but who, as agents, resist and transcend their racial, gender, sexual, class, "moral," and/or other circumscriptions. Deliberately rejecting proscriptions society ascribes to blacks and women, these characters create their own spaces and, overstepping various "boundaries," live autonomously by their own standards, despite the ramifications their insurgence and transgression may, and oftentimes, elicit.

Several novels written by African American women during or shortly after the emergence of the black feminist movement of the 1970's are characterized by a pattern of transgressive black women characters who assert themselves and their independence. Rebellious and noncompliant, these characters are socio-political actors who, as Barbara Christian avers, do not subscribe to communal or societal standards, but rather choose "to stand outside" their community and "define [themselves] as in revolt against it."[2] Virtually uninhibited, these black female characters define themselves by both shaping their existence and giving voice to their own experiences; and, they deviate from the classical black female script that rigidly defines "good" black womanhood as loyalty to black men, sexual fidelity, self-abnegation, and the idolization of marriage and motherhood.[3] In so doing, these characters, as their authors intend, transform conventional images, create alternatives, and, as bell hooks maintains, challenge our "dualistic thinking about good and bad. Making a space for the transgressive

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[2] Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985; New York: Teachers College, 1997), 179.

[3] Deborah E. McDowell, *"The Changing Same": Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995), 109.

image, the outlaw rebel vision, [...] essential to any effort to create a context for transformation."[4]

In post-1960's novels by African American women, then, black female characters depart dramatically from the limited iconography of powerless virtue, endurance, and sentimental pathos associated almost inextricably with early constructions of black womanhood.[5] Whereas most early twentieth-century black literary "heroines" are married, confined to domesticity, and live (directly or indirectly) for their children, their families, their race---for practically *everyone* but themselves---, black female protagonists of post-1960's novels exhibit new dimensions of agency, female being, and possibilities, which differ considerably from early representations of black women. Unlike early literary heroines---usually consumed by moral, sexual, or psychological angst associated with politics of respectability and propriety---black female protagonists of post-1960's novels own themselves, their lifestyles, their be-

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[4] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End, 1992), 4.

[5] Hortense J. Spillers discusses this in relation to Sula specifically; yet, because of its applicability to transgressive black women characters, I utilize it in this fashion accordingly. See Spillers' "A Hateful Passion, A Lost Love," *Feminist Studies* 9 (Summer 1983): 293-323. Early writers Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Fauset, and Ann Petry are exceptions in that they do not (entirely) characterize black women within such limited iconography.

haviors, and their destinies, which are by no means coterminous with racial, sexual, moral or even mystical boundaries.

In post-1960's novels written by African American women, we get, for instance, transgressive black women characters like Meridian Hill, who, after abandoning one child and aborting another, chooses a life of celibacy and political work in "the Black revolution," rather than one of compliance or self-abnegation. Or, Velma Henry who---contending with the all-too-often conflicting roles of wife, mother, career woman, and radical activist---commits adultery and attempts suicide. Still, there is Renay Davis, who, refusing confinement to domesticity within a heterosexist marriage, takes her daughter and leaves her abusive husband for a white lesbian.

Because transgressive behavior is not transhistorical and individuals behave transgressively in myriad ways, this dissertation focuses specifically on those post-1960's characters who---like Meridian, Velma, and Renay---participate *unapologetically* in certain acts of transgression, "illicit" sexuality, or intimate (mis)conduct: adultery, interracial sex, promiscuity, and/or same-gender lov-

ing.[6] This study does not include, then, characters such as Pilate Dead of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977); Edana ("Dana") Franklin of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979); Etta Mae Johnson, Kiswana Browne, and Lorraine and Theresa ("the two") of Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982); or, Sarah Phillips of Andrea Lee's *Sarah Phillips* (1984). For, though written by African American women within the designated timeframe of this study, these characters are limited, whether by genre, theme, or condition, in ways that exclude them. Sarah Phillips, for instance, is restricted largely because of the conservative and limiting nature of the bildungsroman. As a literary convention that traces the development of a character---traditionally a male protagonist---from childhood to young adulthood, the structure of the bildungsroman, in itself, does not allow readers to witness Sarah's full progression "into her own." Characters like Dana Franklin who appear in neo-slave or emancipatory novels exhibit resistance, more often than not, to their enslavement, yet, because of their status as enslaved people, cannot be considered full and autonomous agents. Then, there are women like Pilate

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[6] Meridian Hill, Velma Henry, and Renay Davis are the black female protagonists of Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), and Ann Allen Shockley's *Loving Her* (1974), respectively.

Dead who are, inherently, healers and culture bearers. As such, they are hindered almost automatically by their obligatory position within their community and, due to the consequential role they serve, are, so to speak, not their "own" person but rather the community's.

This dissertation centers, then, exclusively on those characters such Sula Peace, Renay Davis, and Meridian Hill who, through their various instantiations of transgression, defy constructs governing their multiple identities and gratify, invent, and liberate themselves.[7] For, as rebels rather than role models, these women, in their inordinate and transgressive behavior, contest their proscribed roles, dismiss particular mythologies surrounding black women, and, concomitantly, (re)define and expand society's narrow conceptualizations of black womanhood.

It is precisely this (re)visioning, (re)defining, and expansion of narrow constructions of womanhood, and representations of black women in literature, that is the primary focus of this dissertation. Pioneering black feminist literary scholars and critics such as Mary Helen Washington, Barbara Christian, Deborah McDowell, Barbara Smith,

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[7] Characters from Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), Alice Walker's *Meridian*, Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man* (1976), Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), and Ann Allen Shockley's *Loving Her*, respectively.

and Claudia Tate have, in their respective ways, written about, analyzed, and recuperated the literature of black women, and have exposed and resisted limited characterizations and controlling images of them.[8] They have called for literature that explores the black female experience in its totality, as well as a language---that, in ways, integrates black feminist thought and literary analyses---to discuss and record the multiplicity of black women's individual and shared experiences. And, they have taken into account portrayals and visions of black women within, what bell hooks identifies as, a "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy," when others had not seen it as crucial.

Previous scholarship has examined images of the black woman as mammy, matriarch, jezebel, concubine, tragic mulatto, castrator, conjure woman, superwoman, foremother

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[8] Here, I refer specifically to early pathbreaking works by these pioneering literary scholars and critics such as Mary Helen Washington's *Black-Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women* (New York: Anchor, 1975) and *Midnight Birds: Stories of Contemporary Black Women Writers* (New York: Anchor, 1980); Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (Westport: Greenwood, 1980) and *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985; New York: Teachers College, 1997); Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." *African American Literary Theory*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York UP, 2000), 132-146; Deborah McDowell's "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism." *African American Literary Theory*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York UP, 2000), 167-178; and, Claudia Tate's *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1983).

and, more recently, as "saint," sinner," and "savior."[9] Yet, scholars and critics have examined neither the *continuum* of black women's transgressive behavior in literature, nor have they analyzed, as a whole, transgressive black women, consequential figures permeating modern fiction by African American women. It is this void in scholarship, then, that this dissertation seeks to locate, probe, and fill. This study diverges from previous research in that---rather than identify isolated characters merely as "wild," "rebellious," or "unconventional"---it examines, under the rubric "transgressive black women," a panorama of black women characters who, diverging from convention, function as counter-hegemonic paradigms that expand limited constructions of black womanhood and challenge prevailing

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[9] For extended analyses of these images see Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978; London: Verso, 1990); bell hooks' "Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood." *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End, 1981); Trudier Harris' *From Mammies to Militants: Domestics in Black American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1982) and *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Barbara Christian's "Images of Black Women in Afro-American Literature: From Stereotype to Character." *Black Feminist Criticism* (1985; New York: Teachers College, 1997), 1-30; Deborah Gray White's "Jezebel and Mammy: The Mythology of Female Slavery." *Ar'n't I A Woman?* (1985; New York: Norton, 1999), 27-61; Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987); Patricia Hill Collins' "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images." *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990; New York: Routledge, 2000); and, Jacqueline Bryant's "'Clothed in My Right Mind': The Foremother Figure in Early Black Women's Literature," diss., Kent State University, 1998.

definitions of "woman" and "normativity" in American society in general and the black community specifically. It is, after all, not enough for individuals to simply recognize or categorize these characters, but rather to discern what this pattern---this continuum and tradition of transgressive black women in literature---signifies.

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In her plenary session at "Black Women's Studies and the Academy," black feminist historian Darlene Clark Hine stressed the importance of examining black women's intersectionality, since analyses of interlocking factors affecting them get at a deeper level of black women's interiority.[10] In examining black women's inner lives, one confronts, almost inevitably, those "secrets" black women have long held and African Americans, in general, and black women, in particular, have suppressed or have been hesitant to disclose. This secrecy surrounding black women's inner lives is, as Hine avers, a "culture of dissemblance":

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[10] Here, I refer to Darlene Clark Hine's presentation "The Black Women's History Movement: New Dimensions" on February 27, 2003, at the "Black Women's Studies and the Academy" conference at Purdue University.

> Because of the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions, gender role differentiation, and regional economic variations, black women [...] developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives. The dynamics of dissemblance involved creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma.[11]

Historically stigmatized as "other" and stereotyped in a myriad of negative and inauthentic ways, African American women, through dissemblance and self-imposed secrecy, "accrue[d] the psychic space and harness[ed] the resources" to survive their victimization and violence against their bodies, as well as counter stereotypes about their sexuality and moral character used most commonly by white society to justify their rape and sexual violation.[12]

It is not surprising, then, that this cult of secrecy or dissemblance deeply sedimented itself within various segments of the black community, manifesting especially within and, as Hine posits, assuming its most institutionalized form in black women's clubs of the late nineteenth-

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[11] Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance." *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New, 1995), 382.

[12] Ibid.

and early twentieth-centuries.[13] The efforts of black clubwomen were recuperative: that is, to rescue black women, and the larger black community, from sexual and moral infamy by creating "positive" images of them and adopting conventional bourgeois propriety in regards to sexuality, morality, and domesticity. For, as black feminist writer-scholar Paula Giddings illuminates in *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, black women "attacked not only the myth of Black promiscuity, but the notion that women themselves were wholly responsible for their own victimization. […] The lesson that the Black [club] women were trying to impart was that color, class, or the experience of slavery did not nullify the moral strength of true womanhood."[14]

"True" women, as proscribed by the Victorian cult of true womanhood, possessed the virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.[15] Yet, black women, be-

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[13] See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's salient discussion of dissemblance and "politics of respectability" among black Baptist church women in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), 185-229.

[14] Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Quill, 1984), 86, 88.

[15] Victorians, preoccupied with the fallen woman as they were with the innocent maiden and wife, insisted on the innocence and morality of women. Their insistence on women's conformity to

cause of their stigmatization as licentious, immoral, and impure, were excluded from the realm of womanhood, which was usually reserved for middle and upper class white women. Thus, it is black women's relegation to "other" and, thereby, inferior status that black women contested. For, as Hazel Carby contends, black women activists, scholars, and intellectuals had to "define a discourse of black womanhood which would not only address their exclusion from the ideology of true womanhood but [...] also rescue their bodies from a persistent association with illicit sexuality."[16] Thus, their emphasis on respectable behavior not only contested the plethora of negative stereotypes surrounding black women, but also introduced alternate images of black womanhood.

Candice Jenkins, in her dissertation "Cultural Infidels: Intimate Betrayals and the Bonds of Race," explores the nexus between representation and dissemblance, and examines the collision they engender. Much like Hine, Giddings, and Carby, she analyzes the ways in which black women have historically responded to their

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respectability, especially within public spheres, was, however, only one element of a larger culture of social and sexual codifications.

[16] Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), 32.

(mis)representation and stigmatization. Yet, in a methodology that differs from Hine and Giddings, Jenkins uses African American women's literature as a site in which to trace black women's responses to these manifestations:

> The manner in which African American sexual and familial character has traditionally been stigmatized as uncivilized in the US, from the days of slavery onward, has elicited a very specific auto-repressive response from the African American community, particularly from middle-class and female segments of that community, and this response, which I call the "salvific wish," is under continuous interrogation in the literature of African American women.[17]

Locating the salvific wish within the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture, Jenkins delineates it as a largely black, female, and "middle class" sensibility to rescue black women, and the black community at large, from narratives of sexual and familial pathology through respectability and the espousal of conventional bourgeois propriety. She further posits that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American women writers, some of whom belonged to the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) or other professional organizations or literary societies, were invested in portraying black

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[17] Candice Jenkins, "Cultural Infidels: Intimate Betrayal and the Bonds of Race," diss., Duke University, 2001, 6.

people, specifically African American women, in accordance with the salvific wish and its strictures.

As Deborah McDowell observes, "Black women writers responded to the myth of black women's sexual licentiousness by insisting fiercely on their chastity. In attempting to overcome their heritage of rape and concubinage---a fight the club women waged---they stripped the characters they created of *all* sexual desire."[18] Early black women writers, such as Frances Harper and Nella Larsen, for example, created characters in compliance with the politics of respectability and norms of their times, as examinations of Iola Leroy in Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) and Helga Crane of Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) clearly demonstrate.[19] Moral and respectable, Iola glorifies motherhood and domesticity, all the while repressing her sexuality and exuding "saintliness"; and, Helga, though appearing in literature nearly thirty-six years after Iola, is not much more progressive. Running from her sexuality and never confronting it, Helga marries a fundamentalist preacher spontaneously and "prematurely," not only confining herself to domesticity and

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[18] McDowell, 38.

[19] These black female protagonists appear in Frances Harper's *Iola LeRoy* (1892; New York: Oxford UP, 1988) and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, ed., Deborah E. McDowell (1928; New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1986), respectively.

motherhood, but becoming all-the-more repressed and despondent.

Emphasizing the ambition, middle-class values, domesticity, and Christian morality of their characters, Harper and Larsen, like several of their black female contemporaries, restrict black women characters to proscribed ideals to challenge stereotypes surrounding black womanhood. Literary scholars and critics, such as Hazel Carby, Claudia Tate, and Ann duCille, have argued convincingly that these early characters serve, as their authors intend, as innovative "rhetorical device[s]" and as "highly political narrative strateg[ies]."[20] Yet, however conscious and deliberate these authors' political and literary strategizing, their black literary "heroines," very rarely constructed outside the contexts of propriety and the salvific wish, are characterized and behave in accordance with the politics of bourgeois propriety and the "norms" of their time. And so, "despite the early writers' efforts to revise homogenized literary images," as McDowell contends, "they succeeded

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[20] Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 7. See also Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* and Claudia Tate's *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) for extended discussions on the political and polemical nature of some early black women's novels and their characterizations of black female characters.

merely, and inevitably in offering alternative homogenization; they traded myth for countermyth."[21] Thus, with very few exceptions, it is not until much later that we get black women characters who, with complexity and profundity, explore their blackness and femaleness "without the burden of being exemplary standard bearers in an enterprise to uplift the race."[22]

By 1940, African American literature, characterized by the rise of social realism and the protest novel, took on different meanings. Writers of this period, for instance, critiqued interlocking systems of oppression in their diatribes against American racism and the white power structure. With few exceptions---such as Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), Dorothy West's *The Living Is Easy* (1948), and Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* (1953)---, published African American fiction during this era was mainly by male writers Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Chester Himes. Their fiction, an indictment against American white racism and its ideological, hegemonic, and violent oppression of African Americans, focused primarily on the young male protagonist's struggle against alienation, subordina-

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[21] McDowell, 38.

[22] Ibid., 41.

tion, and violence. Thus, most black women in the fiction of these male protest writers are, as Barbara Christian asserts, peripheral types lacking dimensionality:

> In effect, the black women that appear in the novels of these four literary giants come painfully close to the stereotypes about the black woman projected by white southern literature in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Perhaps images do inform reality.[23]

With few exceptions, representations of black women in the works of Wright, Ellison, Baldwin, and Himes are usually in accordance with these writers' internalized images of black womanhood. Characterized as long sufferers, eternal victims, and/or seductresses, black women in literature by these male writers exist either at men's disposal or as impetuses for black men's demise or tragic death, as certainly is the case in Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938). And so, most black women in the fiction of these male protest writers are, as Gloria Wade-Gayles maintains, merely "background figures refracted in a monolithic mirror of blackness or maleness."[24]

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[23] Christian, 15.

[24] Gloria Wade-Gayles, *No Crystal Stair: Visions of Race and Gender in Black Women's Fiction* (1984; Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1997), 2.

African American women writers such as Petry, West, and Brooks, who managed to publish during this period, challenged white supremacist capitalist patriarchy yet did so quite unlike their black male counterparts. As Mary Helen Washington avers in *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860-1960*, African American women writers did not feature female protagonists "hibernating in dark holes contemplating their invisibility," as does Ralph Ellison's unnamed narrator in *Invisible Man*. And, "there are no women dismembering the bodies or crushing the skulls of either women or men" like Richard Wright's black male protagonist, Bigger Thomas, in *Native Son*. In fact, there are only a few female characters, if any, who "succeed in heroic quests without the support of other women or men in their community."[25] Thus, with the rise and popularization of protest literature, a black woman's search for identity, self-definition, and self-actualization was subverted, if not altogether dismissed, since a dominant theme in African American fiction of this era was the black male quest.

What, then, created space for African American women writers to explore the complexities and diverse experiences of black women with range, depth, and complexity? What en-

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[25] Mary Helen Washington, ed., *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860-1960* (New York: Anchor, 1987), xxi.

abled them to contest the matrix of domination contributing to and perpetuating black women's oppression, marginalization, and exclusion? And, what allowed them to challenge and (re)define politics governing their multiple identities in strikingly new, daring, and consequential ways? Indubitably, the political movements ensuing and developing out of the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s did.

The Civil Rights Movement, with a focus on renegotiating the marginalized and segregated social space to which African Americans had been consigned, centered itself around ending social segregation, as well as the political and economic disfranchisement of blacks. Challenging the American social (dis)order that produced and rested on oppositional constructions, the Civil Rights Movement demanded equal rights for all people, specifically African Americans, who had long been relegated to second-class citizenship. Galvanizing individuals around sociopolitical activism and nonviolent action, the Civil Rights Movement raised the racial, class, and political consciousness of Americans. With this new awareness and sensibilities influenced by the struggles for civil rights, then, African American women moved forward in their quest for equality and liberation from American social injustice.

In "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" Alice Walker asserts, for instance, that prior to the movement, she had "never seen [her]self and existed as a statistic exists, or as a phantom. In the white world [she] walked, less real to them than a shadow […], wait[ing] to be called to life. And, by a miracle, [she] was called."[26] Much like Walker, the struggle for civil rights "called" many black women into being, not only providing them with heightened ideological and sociopolitical consciousness, as well as political skills, but also empowering them with knowledge. For, awareness of one's condition, and the metaphysical systems perpetuating that condition, is, in itself, life-giving and transformative, as Walker further contends:

> If knowledge of my condition is all the freedom I get from a "freedom movement," it is better than unawareness, forgottenness, and hopelessness. […] Man only truly lives by knowing; otherwise he simply performs, copying the daily habits of others but conceiving nothing of his creative possibilities as a man, and accepting someone else's superiority and his own misery. […] To know is to exist: to exist is to be involved, to move about, to see the world with my

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[26] Alice Walker, "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 122.

> own eyes. This, at least, the Movement has given me.[27]

In part because of their new awareness of themselves as blacks and partly because of the inclusion of the term "sex" as another dimension in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, African American women began interrogating their position within the movement and society.[28] Having worked exceedingly hard in the black rights struggles, including both the older Civil Rights and subsequent Black Power movements, black women remained "largely unrecognized and unheard of. The cult of manhood worked against them, as it had in the nineteenth century."[29] And, too, the movement was changing and evolving, as black men sought to recapture their manhood, as Paula Giddings observes:

> By 1966, the movement had taken a turn […]. The theme of the late sixties was 'Black Power,' punctuated by a knotted fist. […] Although it may not have been consciously conceived out of the need to affirm manhood, it became a

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[27] Ibid., 121-122.

[28] Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson assert that black and white women began questioning "the inequity of their position in society" in part "because of the success of the Civil Rights movement and the addition of the word 'sex' into Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964" in *A Shining Thread of Hope* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 299. For a discussion on the irony behind the inclusion of the word "sex" to Title VII, prohibiting discrimination in employment, see Paula Giddings' *When and Where I Enter*, 299-300.

[29] Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope*, 298.

> metaphor for the male consciousness of the era.[30]

With extensive focus on the recovery of black manhood, a major component of black cultural nationalism, it became increasingly difficult for black women to address issues affecting them within the movement; and, they strongly desired to contest the simultaneity of oppressions---racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, and classism---confronting them as blacks *and* women.

Marginalized in the black rights struggle, some black women looked to the burgeoning women's liberation movement as a way of challenging patriarchy and addressing issues pertaining to them as black women. Yet, because of the conspicuous racial and class demarcations within the women's movement, black women were largely ignored and alienated.[31] For, most white women associated with the women's movement were, unlike African American women, (upper) middle-class and benefited from the privileges of whiteness. Yet, unlike their white male counterparts, white women, because of their gender, had, in exchange for white privilege and "protection," been consigned to subor-

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[30] Giddings, 315.

[31] A plethora of scholars, such as Angela Davis, Paula Giddings, Darlene Clark Hine, bell hooks, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Madhu Dubey, and Toni Morrison, have discussed extensively both racial and class biases in the women's liberation movement.

dinate positions and ascribed to narrowly defined roles within the male-dominated American social (dis)order. Invested in (re)defining themselves beyond their traditional roles as wives and mothers, second-wave feminists galvanized around renegotiating the dynamics of gender and identity within American society.

Demanding economic parity and gender equality, middle-class mainstream (white) feminists focused on rescuing women from domesticity and confinement within private spheres, "seeking sanction to work at a 'meaningful' job outside the home."[32] For most black women, however, this had never been their concern since they, in addition to maintaining a household, had historically worked outside their homes out of economic necessity and/or choice, as Toni Morrison observes:

> The black woman did the housework, the drudgery; true, she reared the children, often alone, but she did all that while occupying a place on the job market, a place her mate could not get or which *his* pride would not accept. […] So she combined being a responsible person with being a female.[33]

To a certain extent, then, white middle-class women were striving to function in society in ways black women had

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[32] Ibid., 299.

[33] Toni Morrison, "What the Black Women Thinks about Women's Lib." *The New York Times Magazine* (August 22, 1971), 15.

traditionally, whether by choice or not. Why, then, should African American women participate in a movement that largely ignored, if not neglected, their own individual needs as blacks and women? More specifically, why join white feminists when certain aspects of black womanhood had "always been the very essence of what American womanhood [was] trying to become."[34]

In *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, Beverly Guy-Sheftall contends that "black feminist struggle came to the forefront in a more sustained manner and among a larger group, mainly as a result of the failure of the Civil Rights and women's rights movements to address the particular concerns of black women."[35] And so, African American women's relegation in both the black rights and women's liberation movements served as an impetus for their creation of their own black feminist ideologies regarding black womanhood, as Madhu Dubey further contends:

> Both of these movements at once catalyzed and constrained the formulation of a feminist politics centering around the black woman. […] The internal gaps and contradictions of black nationalist

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[34] Joyce Ladner, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), 239.

[35] Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: New, 1995), 13-14.

> discourse, especially visible in its construction of black womanhood, opened the space for an alternative black feminist definition of womanhood.
>
> This black feminist definition was partly abetted by, but more importantly articulated against, the Women's Liberation movement of the 1970s. The close political contact between the Civil Rights and the Women's Liberation movements proved highly productive for black women; the white feminist revaluation of traditional conceptions of white femininity provided a strong impetus for black women activists to reconsider their own identities.[36]

Discriminated against because of their gender and race in the black rights and women's movements, respectively, African American women organized their own black feminist agenda to address the concerns of black women. As black feminists, then, they were "actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression" and saw as their "particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking."[37]

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[36] Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), 15; and, La Frances Rodgers-Rose, ed., *The Black Woman* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980), 241.

[37] The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement" (1977) in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: Feminist, 1982), 13.

Thus, they viewed "[b]lack feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions" confronting black women.[38]

As black feminists or "womanists," to use Alice Walker's term, African American women contested interlocking systems of oppression systematically and directly affecting them. And, it is within this socio-historical, cultural, and especially political context that we get an influx of literature by African American women, voicing their new, revolutionary consciousness about womanhood; dismantling the dissemblance surrounding black women; and, excavating, recovering, and (re)claiming their "herstory," while concomitantly shaping and defining their present and future. For, as a way of moving "forward the quest for social justice and radical and sexual equality," as Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson observe, "some [of] black women's most dangerous issues were first aired [within] the 'safe' space of the arts."[39]

Toni Cade (Bambara), for instance, publishes her pathbreaking *The Black Woman* (1970), the first anthology of its time---written by, about, and for black women---that explores, comparatively, the multiplicity of black women's

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[38] Ibid.

[39] Hine and Thompson, 303.

individual and collective experiences. Maya Angelou, Shirley Chisholm, and Angela Davis publish their autobiographies *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), *Unbought and Unbossed* (1970), and *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974), giving voice to the complex nature and personal, public, and political dynamics of black women's lives in America. African American women authors Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gayl Jones produce novels, primarily female-centered, that interrogate the interiority of their black female protagonists and---like Ntozake Shange's provocative choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* (1977)---reveal a plethora of issues confronting African American women within the black community and larger American society.[40]

Literary scholars and critics analyze the development and proliferation of African American women's literature, examine representations of black women and delineate thematic patterns in African American women's fiction, as do Mary Helen Washington in *Black-Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women* (1975) and *Midnight Birds: Stories of Contemporary Black Women Writers* (1980); Roseann P.

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[40] Here, I refer to these authors' first and early novels, including Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970; New York: Pocket, 1972) and *Sula;* Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970) and *Meridian;* and Jones' *Corregidora* (1975; Boston: Beacon, 1986) and *Eva's Man.*

Bell, Bettye J. Parker, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall in *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature* (1979); and, Barbara Christian in *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (1980). Still, others like Barbara Smith in "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977) and Deborah McDowell in "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" (1980) theorize about black women, feminism, and literature, articulating the need for a language that---integrating black feminist thought and literary analyses---discusses the totality of black women's experiences. And, African American women writers-scholars-critics Cheryl Clarke, Gloria Hull, Audre Lorde, Ann Allen Shockley, and Barbara Smith center politics of sexuality by not only foregrounding the widely-neglected experiences of black lesbians, but also contesting the heterosexism and homophobia deeply sedimenting the black community and larger American society.

Read collectively, the influx of foundational literature and scholarship---autobiographies, anthologies, critical essays, fiction, literary criticism and theory---by black women typify the relationship between political movements and literary canons in America.[41] And, it evidences

a certain dual intertextuality in that these texts, as well as the black women writers-scholars-critics themselves, are in constant conversation with each other. Essentially, then, these black women, as do their black female characters, contest dichotomous constructions of private versus public spheres, insisting, instead, that their personal and political issues cannot easily be separated into exclusive or binary categories. It is precisely because of this almost-automatically inseparable and imbricating nature of the personal and political that these characters' private indiscretions and recalcitrant actions assume political significance and serve, therefore, as a form of not solely personal but sociopolitical insurgence. And, to some extent, this goes directly back to my initial interrogation: what does this pattern of transgressive black women, and continuum of black women's transgressive behavior in literature, signify?[42]

Centering selected novels by African American women writers, ultimately, this study examines the ways in which these authors, through their black female protagonists, deconstruct ubiquitous stereotypes and air dangerous issues

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[41] "Contemporary African American Women Writers" in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Nellie McKay, et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 2015.

[42] Jenkins, 7.

surrounding black women; collapse oppositional constructions upon which the American social (dis)order rests; subvert prescriptive models of black and female identity; and, challenge the matrix of domination that oppresses these transgressive black women characters but neither subdues nor defeats them.

CHAPTER II

"UNBOUGHT AND UNBOSSED": TONI MORRISON'S *SULA* AND THE SUBVERSION OF THE CLASSICAL BLACK FEMALE SCRIPT

> I always thought of Sula as quintessentially black, metaphorically black, if you will, which is not melanin and certainly not unquestioning fidelity to the tribe. She is new world black and new world woman extracting choice from choicelessness, responding inventively to found things. Improvisational. Daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the-house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable. And dangerously female.[1]

In "Revolutionary Black Women: Making Ourselves Subjects" of *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks asserts that "the construction of radical black female subjectivity is rooted in a willingness to go against the grain"; and, she uses Shirley Chisholm---the first black congresswoman *and* first black to campaign for United States President---as an exemplary radical black female subject who, "outspoken," developed a "critical consciousness" and "claimed her right to subjectivity without apology."[2] It is

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[1] Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke UP, 1994), 390.

[2] bell hooks, "Revolutionary Black Women: Making Ourselves Subjects" in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End, 1992), 53-54.

only fitting that this second chapter, which examines Sula Mae Peace as the quintessential transgressive black woman of modern African American women's fiction, incorporates a (fore)title encapsulating the unapologetically radical and transgressive nature of Sula, who is, to use Morrison's terminology, "uncontained and uncontainable."[3] For, no other (fore)title is more salient and appropriate than Shirley Chisholm's "unbought and unbossed," the slogan of her 1968 congressional campaign and title of her 1970 autobiography.

While a correlation between Chisholm's radical notion of "unbought and unbossed"---being, at once, "un-negotiated," uncompromising, and "un-policed"---exists and is applicable to Sula, this study does not treat Sula characterologically as a transparent transcription of reality but, rather, accordingly as the literary figure she is. What this chapter does aim to do, then, is examine Sula both as a radical black female subject and the transgressive black woman extraordinaire, and explore the ways in which Morrison's characterization of Sula, in juxtaposition with other characters, resists and subverts the classical black female script.

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[3] Morrison, 390.

The Classical Black Female Script, Or What a Black Woman Ought to Say and Do

As typically and rigidly defined, "goodness" for women constitutes sexual fidelity, self-abnegation, and the idolization of marriage and motherhood.[4] And, for black women, "goodness" also entails racial solidarity and racial loyalty. According to nineteenth-century ideologies of femininity, which excluded black women, "woman," as Angela Davis asserts, "became synonymous in the prevailing propaganda with 'mother' and 'housewife.'"[5] Women---white women, that is---were expected to be nurturing mothers, gentle companions, and housekeepers for their husbands. Yet, while white women became the inhabitants of this sphere of womanhood totally disconnected from the realm of productive work, black women became, as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham contends, anomalies embodying "otherness":

> In the centuries between the Renaissance and the Victorian era, Western culture constructed and represented changing and conflicting images of woman's sexuality, which shifted dia-

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[4] See Deborah McDowell's *"The Changing Same": Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995), 109, as her assessment of how women are "classically defined" influences my conceptualizations of the classical black female script.

[5] Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1981), 5, 12.

> metrically from images of lasciviousness to moral purity. Yet Western conceptions of black women's sexuality resisted change during this same time. [...] The black woman came to symbolize, according to Sander Gilman, an "icon for black sexuality in general."[6]

Discursively, as well as through print media and artistic imagery, black women were represented outside "a mirror of human heterogeneity" and were ascribed collective pathological uniformity: for, "every black woman regardless of her income, occupation, or education became the embodiment of deviance."[7]

As a counter-discourse to the politics of prejudice, as well as to their mis-representation, black women deployed respectability as a subversive tool and adhered to dominant society's codes of conduct for women, which entailed conformity to bourgeois "norms"---temperance, hard work, cleanliness of person and property, polite manners,

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[6] Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham, "The Metalanguage of Race," 263. See also Sander L. Gilman's "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986), 223-240; and, Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), in which Carby observes that because "the figurations of black women existed in an antithetical relationship with the values embodied in the cult of true womanhood," black women not only came to represent sexuality in general, but also came to symbolize illicit and/or "taboo" sexuality.

[7] Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), 190.

moral virtue and, above all, sexual purity. In their adherence to respectability, black women asserted the agency to (re)imagine and (re)define themselves as new subjectivities outside the strictures of prevailing racist discourse. Yet, in their claims to respectability and moral superiority, a focal tenet of respectability, they instituted---both deliberately and not---certain standards by which black women regardless of their social or economic status were judged. This, in addition to the larger black community's ideologies of racial uplift, and black women's expected role in "advancing the race," fostered the creation of a script that determined and defined ("good") black womanhood.[8] For, "Race work" or "racial uplift," as Higginbotham further posits,

> equated normality with conformity to white middle-class models of gender roles and sexuality. Given the extremely limited educational and income opportunities during the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries, many black women linked mainstream domestic duties, codes of dress, sexual conduct, and public etiquette with both individual and group progress."[9]

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[8] Higginbotham, "Metalanguage," 271.

[9] Ibid., 271. See also Higginbotham's "Beyond the Sound of Silence: Afro-American Women in History," *Gender and History* 1 (Spring 1989): 58-59.

Black women's engagement of bourgeois propriety and respectability functioned, then, as a conduit to not only counter their persistent stigmatization and sexual denigration, but also participate in the movement toward racial uplift. For, black women's display of decorum---"proper" and "respectable" behavior---would, as black leaders, intellectuals, and activists asserted, gain them and the larger black race access to equal civil and political rights.

With the changing socio-cultural, political, economic, and "moral" climate of America (induced, in part, by mass migration, industrialization, the growing economy and industrial capitalism, the infiltration of women in the workforce, war, the development and licensing of the birth control pill by the Food and Drug Administration, and the political struggles of the 1950's, 1960's, and 1970's), the role of women evolved. Whereas the "damnation of women" had once been, as Du Bois maintains, women's bearing children at the expense of their "intelligence" and "the chance to do their best work," the changing social conditions in America provided women opportunities outside the roles traditionally ascribed to them. And so, Du Bois' (then) radically progressive ideologies and "solutions" to the dilemma confronting modern women came largely into fruition: for, "[t]he future woman," as he eloquently argued, "must have a

life work and economic independence. She must have knowledge. She must have the right to motherhood at her own discretion."[10]

Yet, while America's changing milieu allowed women access to "life work," "economic independence," and "knowledge"---without their necessarily being attached to marriage and motherhood---women, specifically black women, who accomplished this or who, to be more exact, transcended particular aspects of the classical black female script, did so at a cost, as Mary Helen Washington's "Declaring (Ambiguous) Liberty" illustrates. Foregrounding middle-class black women and work, Washington demonstrates that the classical black female script---black women's expected racial loyalty, commitment to racial uplift, self-abnegation, sexual fidelity, and idealization of marriage and motherhood---not only persists, but is embedded so intricately in American popular culture, African American literature, and even black women's fiction that it has practically become a naturalized trope. For, whereas working-class black women are limned as loyal and admirable, middle-class black women---or black women who achieve "success" in the professional world outside the domestic sphere

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[10] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Damnation of Women" in *Darkwater: Voices from the Veil* (New York: Schocken, 1969, 1920), 164 -165.

and/or without participating in racial uplift---are considered threatening and are portrayed, therefore, as vain, materialistic, selfish, dangerous, disloyal, destructive, and often betrayers of the black community. To reconcile this conflict or tension between their autonomy---their rights to fulfill themselves, their pursuits, and their desires---and their expected obligation to the black community, these fictitious "ambitious" black women usually have very few options: expiation for their perceived deviance; initiation of a commitment to racial uplift, usually via community work or social activism; conformity to conventional life; or, most tragic and dramatic, death.[11]

While several points could easily be extracted from Washington's salient essay, what I want to extrapolate and, for the purpose of my study, call to particular attention is the way in which *acceptable* behavior for black women---

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[11] Mary Helen Washington, "Declaring (Ambiguous) Liberty: Paule Marshall's Middle-Class Women" in *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work*, ed., Sharon Harley and the Black Women and Work Collective (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002), 201. It is worth noting that Washington's assessment of these middle-class black women links directly back to Higginbotham's earlier assertions regarding racial uplift, conformity, and black women. Moreover, Higginbotham further observes that, "Today the metalanguage of race continues to bequeath its problematic legacy. While its discursive construction of reality into two camps---blacks versus whites or Afrocentric versus Eurocentric standpoints---provides the basis for resistance against external forces of black subordination, it tends to forestall resolution of problems of gender, class, and sexual orientation internal to black communities" in "Metalanguage," 272.

yet another metaphor for "good" black womanhood---is almost always constructed as contingent not solely upon black women in and of themselves but, rather, of black women in relation to "others": be it their race, communities, families, children, occupation, or so forth. After all, those women not defined by or who live outside these parameters are perceived almost inevitably as threatening, dangerous, deviant---as forces with which to be reckoned. Secondly, and of equal if not more importance, is the fashion in which class---as an unstable, non-transhistorical signifier---serves, in essentialist terms, as an indicator of black women's racial loyalty, solidarity, and/or commitment to racial uplift, which, as Washington contends, has not always been the case:

> This denigration of black middle-class women is a relatively recent phenomenon. Well into the twentieth century, when black women's professional choices were limited to teaching, nursing, some form of social service, and occasionally writing, literally all professional work done by women could be enlisted on behalf of the race.[12]

Whereas black women's professional choices were limited, well into the twentieth century, in ways that easily categorized practically all of their professional work as

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[12] Washington, 202.

"race work," black women's professions during the mid- to latter-twentieth century (post-World World II, desegregation, Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements) changed gradually and significantly, taking black women and their professional choices into trajectories that complicated any easy or simple categorizations of their work. Thus, black women's "newfound" admittance to work previously denied them had remarkable, though seemingly contradictory, effects on the classical black female script: for, it provided black women access to a more independent livelihood outside their so-called proverbial place; yet, rather than expand what constitutes "race work," it (re)inforced traditional notions that stigmatize those women (e.g. middle-class women) who, ostensibly, abandon their obligatory role in racial uplift.

I turn, then, to Toni Morrison's 1973 novel *Sula*, which I read in dialogue with the sociopolitical movements during which it was produced, to explore the mediations through which Morrison translates, problematizes, and deconstructs the classical black female script, as well as the tensions and contradictions it perpetuates. For, in her deliberate attempts, I argue, to *not* inscribe Sula within the strictures of the script, bourgeois culture, or other social and communal circumscriptions, Morrison not

only destabilizes and de-legitimizes the classical black female script, but also creates an alternative existence for her black female protagonist that is, as she herself contends, unaligned with conventionality for women:

> Sula was hard, for me; very difficult to make up that kind of character. […] a black woman at that time who didn't want to do the conventional thing, had only one other kind of thing to do. If she had talent she went into the theater. And if she had a little voice, she could sing, or she could go to a big town and she could pretend she was dancing or whatever. That was the only outlet if you chose not to get married and have children. That was it. […] But what about the woman who doesn't do any of that but is nevertheless a rule-breaker, a kind of law-breaker, a lawless woman? Not a law-abiding woman. […Sula] does not believe in any of [the community's] laws and breaks them all. Or ignores them. So that she becomes more interesting […] because of that quality of abandon.[13]

It is, then, precisely because Sula exists as an agent entirely in and of herself and her own consciousness---not to her community and race, nor to that of social or communal injunctions---that she is, as Morrison intends, a rebel idea and a transgressive black woman character. And, to advert to Washington's argument, it is namely because of

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[13] Robert Stepto, "'Intimate Things in Place': A Conversation with Toni Morrison," in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danielle Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994), 380-81.

Sula's "quality of abandon"---or refusal to invest in and help "advance" her community---as well as her disregard for communal sanctions, that she is a "pariah" who, much like the middle-class black women of Washington's study, is perceived as threatening, dangerous, destructive, deviant, and a betrayer of the black community.

Yet, before I begin my examination of Sula as the quintessential transgressive black woman of modern African American women's fiction, let me first explore and assess the context---namely, Sula's childhood experiences with her mother, Hannah, and her best friend Nel---that serves as an impetus for her later unconventional and transgressive behavior. For, while my primary focus is on Sula, I will at times decentralize her and, juxtaposing her with others, emphasize those significant relationships with other individuals of her Bottom community that contribute to and help foster her later transgressive lifestyle.

"Something Else to Be": Context for Sula's Transgressive Behavior

In Part I of Toni Morrison's *Sula*, it is evident that both Sula and Nel are, at young ages, cognizant of the limited roles ascribed to all women, especially black women. For, the novel's narratorial voice informs us that since

they had "discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be."[14] In their search for "something else," they create identities for themselves that, extending beyond that of their female progenitors, challenge oppressive forces---racism, patriarchy, classism, and heterosexism---that infringe on their agency and threaten to relegate them to inferior status.

Sula, for instance, grows up in a household marked by "dysfunction" and chaos: she is the granddaughter of Eva Peace, a one-legged woman, who dominates the lives of her children, friends, strays, and boarders (30); in fact, "[u]nder Eva's distant eye, and prey to her idiosyncrasies, her own children grew up shealthily" (41). With the exception of "manlove"---that is, "simply [loving] maleness, for its own sake"---Eva bequeathed nothing to her daughters or son, whom she sets afire, ironically, out of love. And so, it is Eva's questionable and ambivalent behavior as a mother that eventually leads Hannah to inquire, "Mamma, did you ever love us?" (66).

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[14] Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Plume, 1973), 52. Subsequent references to this novel are cited parenthetically in the text.

Much like her mother Eva, it is with a similar "distant eye" and insatiable love of men that Hannah herself raises her own daughter Sula. Sula is, for example, the only child of Hannah Peace, who---refusing after her husband's death to live without "the attentions of a man"---requires some "touching" every day (42, 44). Hannah manages, in fact, to maintain a constant stream of lovers, namely the husbands of her friends and neighbors, and is, simply put, a woman who "rippled with sex" (42). For, "she could," as the narratorial voice asserts, "break up a marriage before it had become one---she would make love to the new groom and wash his wife's dishes all in an afternoon" (44). Yet, despite Hannah's unquenchable desire for the sexual "attentions" of men, she is highly selective, and even displays discretion, when it comes to the location in which she performs sex:

> But since in that crowded house there were no places for private and spontaneous lovemaking, Hannah would take the man down into the cellar in the summer where it was cool back behind the coal bin and the newspapers, or in the winter they would step into the pantry and stand against the shelves she had filled with canned goods, or lie on the flour sack just under the rows of tiny green peppers. When those places were not available, she would slip into the seldom-used parlor, or even up to her bedroom. She liked the last place [her bedroom] least, not because Sula slept

> in the room with her but because her love mate's tendency was always to fall asleep afterward and Hannah was fastidious about whom she slept with. She would fuck practically anything, but sleeping with someone implied for her a measure of trust and a definite commitment. (43-44)

It is ironic and certainly worth calling special attention to the fact that Hannah---while in consistent need of sexual activity---differentiates between casual sex and committed sexual intimacy. Hannah's differentiation between copulation and sexual commitment signifies, then, Morrison's deliberate efforts to problematize the classical black female script by characterizing Hannah---and delineating the specificity of her sexual life---outside the confines of its strictures. And so, Hannah's rationalization behind, or hesitation about, abstaining from (frequent) sexual activity in her bedroom stems *not* from the appearance of impropriety it might instill in her young, impressionable daughter but, rather, from her own discomfort with---or, perhaps, rejection of---the emotional responsibilities, such as "trust" and "commitment," that society attaches to sexual intercourse.

In fact, Hannah's nonchalance and casual disposition regarding sexuality infuriate other Bottom women, many of

whom are themselves involved in extramarital affairs and "illicit" sexual activity:

> Hannah exasperated the women in the town---the "good" women, who said, "One thing I can't stand is a nasty woman"; the whores, who were hard put to find trade among black men anyway and who resented Hannah's generosity; the middling women, who had both husbands and affairs, because Hannah seemed too unlike them, having no passion attached to her relationships and being wholly incapable of jealousy. (44)

It is safe to assume, then, that Hannah is consumed by sex, in and of itself, and that sex---with no passion and commitment---is, ultimately, what sustains her. It comes as absolutely no surprise, therefore, that of the two "lessons" Hannah teaches her daughter Sula, one explicitly concerns sex: that is, "that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable" (44)---which exists in stark opposition to the principles regarding sexuality embodied in both the classical black female script, and in the politics governing "ideal" womanhood. For, this "sense of the quotidian nature of sexual activity," as Candice Jenkins contends, "in addition to the frank appreciation of its pleasurable qualities, already runs counter to the sexual repressiveness encouraged by the salvific wish."[15]

Hannah, in addition to this "lesson" on sex---which Sula learns incidentally after witnessing her mother having sex in the pantry---also imparts a second lesson unto Sula: that "there was no other that you could count on" (118-119), which Sula learns upon overhearing her mother admit that, while she loves Sula, she "just don't like her" (57). Hannah's differentiation between loving and (not) liking her daughter---which alludes interestingly enough to Hannah's inquiry to Eva of "did you ever love us?"---exists, much like her ideologies regarding sexuality, in direct opposition to the classical black female script, which demands women's idealization and exaltation of motherhood. For, Hannah---unlike her women friends with whom she converses about love, children, and motherhood---demystifies and differentiates, as Hortense Spillers posits, between the gradations and contingencies of "love":

> The three women [Hannah's friends] confirm for each other the agonies of childbearing, but can never quite bring themselves around to admitting that love is contingent and human and all too-often connected with notions of duty. Hannah tells one of the friends that her quality of love is sufficient."[16]

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[15] Candice Jenkins, "Cultural Infidels: Intimate Betrayal and the Bonds of Race," diss., Duke University, 2001, 52.

[16] Hortense J. Spillers, "A Hateful Passion, A Lost Love," *Feminist Studies* 9 (Summer 1983): 315-316.

Ultimately, then, what Hannah's notion of "difference" regarding her capacity to love yet not like Sula signifies is her ability to distinguish between obligation and choice: for, while society and the classical black female script expect mothers to "love" their children, mothers do not necessarily have to "like" them, as Hannah herself conceives. Thus, in Hannah's distinguishing between these emotions, not only does she demystify fallacious or generalized assumptions regarding the "quality of love"---especially where mothers are concerned---but illustrate that "love" and "like" are not coterminous notions.

Moreover, of significantly equal, if not greater, importance is that of the "lessons" Hannah inadvertently instills in her daughter---namely on sex, love, and non-dependency---, none of them offer Sula any substantial or pragmatic instructions on girlhood/womanhood or, more specifically, on propriety and codes of conduct:

> Perhaps most critically important about the relationship between Sula and her mother is what Sula does *not* learn from Hannah, namely, conventions in the Bottom about propriety and female behavior. Such conventions are traditionally transmitted from mother to daughter---as Adrienne Rich writes in her treatise on motherhood, *Of Woman Born*, "it is the mother through whom patriar-

chy early teaches the small female her proper expectations."[17]

Hannah's "failure"---or, perhaps, refusal---to instruct Sula on female behavior and codes of conduct, though in some ways detrimental, provides Sula space in which to create a self that, extending beyond that of her female progenitors, is unaligned with the classical black female script; and, it functions, in part, as an impetus for Sula's later unconventional and transgressive behavior. For, as Spillers avers, Sula's identity, personality, and "moral shape, however, [do] not come unprecedented or autonomously derived. […] Just as Hannah and Eva have been Sula's principal models, they have also determined certain issues which she will live out in her own career."[18]

Unlike Hannah, Nel's mother Helene Wright---who is, perhaps, the apotheosis of motherhood as it is defined by the classical black female script---"rose grandly to the occasion of motherhood" (18), and raises her daughter in strict accordance with bourgeois propriety and respectability: in fact, "under Helene's hand [Nel] became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasm that little Nel showed were

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[17] Jenkins, 53. See also Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1986), 243.

[18] Spillers, 315.

calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (18). Helene's adherence to and apparent mastery of "traditional tenets of bourgeois feminine propriety," as well as her transmittance of these principles to her daughter, illustrate, then, "the role of intergenerational training in the progression of black women's sexual dissemblance"; and, it suggests that "the self-discipline required of black women [...] is a learned behavior, the logical extension of a prior, maternally imposed discipline."[19]

Yet, while Nel is raised in accordance with the classical black female script---which is, in her case, severely "maternally imposed" and socially mandated---she eventually comes to question her own identity in relation to that of her maternal female progenitors, in particular to her mother who apotheosizes propriety and "virtuous" behavior. Nel's sojourn begins, for instance, in 1920, while she rides a segregated train to New Orleans with Helene, who is objectified and sexualized by the patriarchal gazes of male passengers. After having witnessed her mother's victimization and silent composure, ten-year old Nel vows that no man will ever look at her that way. For, she would never

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[19] Jenkins, 54.

let "midnight eyes and marble flesh [...] accost her and turn her into jelly" (22). Upon Nel and Helene's return to the Bottom, Nel has an epiphany: while looking in the mirror, she discovers "I'm me. Not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me" (28).

Nel's experience on the train and her newfound "me-ness" foster, then, her creation of a self outside the confines of girlhood/womanhood, and exclusive of both the repressive middle-class, Victorian values of her mother and licentious behavior of her grandmother Rochelle Sabat, "a Creole whore" (16). In fact, it is worth noting here that it is precisely because of Helene's status as the "illegitimate" daughter of "a Creole whore" that she herself very consciously and deliberately adheres to and imposes on Nel codes of propriety and "respectable" behavior for women. And so, it is of much critical significance that Nel establishes a "self" that is incongruous with the diametrically opposing identities of Helene and Rochelle, and---in spite of her mother Helene---cultivates a friendship with Sula, whose female progenitors epitomize "dysfunction" and unconventionality for women. Thus, both Nel's "newfound" identity and friendship with Sula demonstrate, then, Nel's subversive nature, as well as her defiance of her

mother, the status quo she (Helene) represents, and aspects of the classical black female script she embodies.

Sula's and Nel's inventing themselves outside the classical black female script and its strictures materializes, and in ways culminates, in two consequential correlating events---their masturbatory and homoerotic "grass play" scene and their interactions with Chicken Little---, both of which illustrate a plethora of things: these events demonstrate Sula's and Nel's disengagement of the classical black female script through their empowering homosocial female relationship; they evidence their need for liberation from patriarchy and social proscriptions for women; and, of even greater significance, their actions reveal---perhaps, for the first time---both Sula's *and* Nel's transgressive behavior. The first event, their highly homoerotic and masturbatory "grass play" scene, for instance, occurs near the riverbank:

> In concert, without ever meeting each other's eyes, [Sula and Nel] stroked the blades up and down, up and down. Nel found a thick twig and, with her thumbnail, pulled away its bark until it was stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence. Sula looked about and found one too. When both twigs were dressed Nel moved easily to the next stage and began tearing up rooted grass to make a bare spot of earth. When a generous clearing was made, Sula traced intricate patterns in it with her twig. At

> first Nel was content to do the same. But soon she grew impatient and poked her twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat hole that grew deeper and wider with the least manipulation of her twig. Sula copied her, and soon each had a hole the size of a cup. Nel began a more strenuous digging and, rising to her knee, was careful to scoop out the dirt as she made her hole deeper. Together they worked until the two holes were one and the same. (58)

And, a second significantly interlocking event---the Chicken Little scene---further illustrates Sula's and Nel's creations of identities outside the parameters of the classical black female script. For, they abruptly end their homoerotic "grass play" once Chicken Little, whom they eventually kill---or, do *not* save to be more precise---interrupts their intimacy:

> […] an unspeakable restlessness and agitation held [Sula and Nel]. At the same instant each girl heard footsteps in the grass. A little boy [Chicken Little] in too big knickers was coming up from the lower bank of the river. […] Sula picked him up by his hands and swung him outward then around and around. His knickers ballooned and his shrieks of frightened joy startled the birds and the fat grasshoppers. When he slipped from [Sula's] hands and sailed away out over the water they could still hear his bubbly laughter. […] The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank. The pressure of his hard and tight little fingers was still in

> Sula's palms as she stood looking at the closed place in the water. (60-61)

Though Chicken's death is ostensibly accidental, neither Sula nor Nel attempts to save him; and, Nel, who insists that they tell no one, remains calm: for, "Just as the water closed peacefully over the turbulence of Chicken Little's body, so had contentment washed over [Nel's] enjoyment" (170). In fact, over forty years after this tragic event, Nel recalls it and, feeling absolutely no remorse, wonders instead, "Why didn't I feel bad when it happened? How come it felt so good to see him fall?"

In their homoerotic "grass play" and their "killing" Chicken, a male meddler, Sula and Nel evidence their (un)conscious desires to eradicate oppressive forces---racism, patriarchy, classism, and heterosexism---that threaten their agency and place restrictions of homosocial relationships. And, of even greater critical significance, it evidences Morrison's conscious and deliberate attempts to problematize the classical black female script, namely by collapsing dichotomous constructions of "good" and "bad":

> Another landmark in Nel's quest, which overlaps with Sula's quest, is the incident with Chicken Little. Morrison has done a wonderful reversal here, further underscoring the necessity of problematizing binaries. One of her

> key points is to question the reader's easy acceptance of appearances and binaries. The reader is lulled into believing that Nel is the good one, Sula the bad one. But, in the Chicken Little scene, Morrison forces the reader to confront this attitude.[20]

Thus, whereas Nel had been perceived almost automatically as the apotheosis of "good" and "polite" behavior---and had been, as a result, analyzed historically (by scholars, critics, and/or feminists) as Sula's diametric opposite---, Nel transgresses "normality" and convention for women in her active and deliberate participation in what leads to the unfortunate death of Chicken Little.

Chicken Little's death marks, then, a consequential turning point in the lives of both Sula and Nel: after his tragic death, for instance, Nel chooses a life of conformity, while Sula becomes all the more radical. Chicken drowns in 1922, yet the reader's next encounter with Nel does not occur until 1927, when she---though "never […] hell-bent to marry" (82-83)---accepts Jude's marriage proposal. Forsaking her childhood resilience and transgressive lifestyle, Nel marries, immerses into family life, integrates into the community, and leads an ostensibly conventional middle-class existence. Sula, conversely, leaves

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[20] Rebecca D. Bliss, "Dangerous Women: The Quest for Alternative Narratives as Feminist Revolution in Contemporary American Women's Fiction," diss., Purdue University, 1998, 57-58.

the Bottom---after marriage, a heterosexist institution, intervenes on her and Nel's union---for ten years, during which time she attends college in Nashville and travels to Detroit, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Macon, and San Diego (120). Sula's leaving Medallion and especially her attending college are, in various respects, transgressive and unanticipated behavior. For, one might have expected Nel, who comes from a middle-class upbringing, to attend college. Yet, Sula---who had shown no prior interest in school and who, like her "dysfunctional" mother and grandmother, could have easily stayed in Medallion---pursues a college education instead. One might easily ask, then, what accounts for Sula's leaving the Bottom and attending college? What happens to her during her ten-year estrangement from her family and Medallion community? And, of equal if not more importance, why does Morrison not dramatize these consequential years of Sula's development?

Though seemingly characterological in nature, these questions are important, nonetheless, in interrogating the text, as well as Morrison's intentions. After all, Sula's attending college and especially her refusal to work or "give back" to her community afterwards are transgressive behavior for *any* black person, let alone a black woman, in 1927. For, it was, in fact, uncommon for black people---

and especially rare for black women, who worked mostly as domestics then---to attend college. For, during that time, most black women worked out of economic necessity rather than choice. And, even white women who did not work were, more often than not, married, confined to middle-class domesticity, and very rarely college educated. Thus, Sula's leaving Medallion (instead of settling down and marrying like other Bottom women), attending college, refusing to work and invest in her community, and traveling intranationally---a luxury unavailable to most non-blues-singing black women then---demonstrate not only her living uncategorically autonomous by her own standards, but evidence as well her defiance of the classical black female script and what it specifies as "normative" behavior for black women.[21]

"And…She Became Dangerous": Sula's Subversive and Transgressive (Adult) Behavior

Rebecca D. Bliss, in her dissertation "Dangerous Women: The Quest for Alternative Narrative as Feminist Revolution in Contemporary American Women's Fiction," exam-

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[21] For detailed analyses of black women blues singers and/or the politics surrounding their representations and music, see Angela Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage, 1998); and, Hazel Carby's "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues" in *Radical America* 20(4):1986, 9-22.

ines Toni Morrison's *Sula* as a contemporary American text, which represents a woman's "willingness to quest for and construct a self-identity apart from, while even as a product of, the American psyche and all that that entails by way of ideology, patriarchy, history, socialization, values and racism."[22] Furthermore, in her assessment, she goes on to delineate Sula as a woman character who is dangerous, in part, for the aforementioned reasons, but namely because Sula "threaten[s] to overthrow the traditional status quo" by seeking an identity and establishing a lifestyle, or narrative, that is "alternative to the traditional patriarchally mandated narratives for women."[23] Functioning outside the parameters of social and communal proscriptions for women, Sula transgresses convention and, concomitantly, invests in her "self" rather than live a life of conformity. In so doing, she exists, as Hortense Spillers avers, "in contradistinction to the tide of virtue and pathos which tends to overwhelm black female [characters] in a monolith of terms and possibilities."[24]

Sula is, for instance, very much unlike other Bottom women---who married, bore children, and were confined to

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[22] Rebecca D. Bliss, 20.

[23] Ibid., 20-21.

[24] Hortense Spillers, "A Hateful Passion," 293.

family and domestic life---namely, because she uncharacteristically repudiates conventional life (in particular, marriage and motherhood), as well as the classical black female script, whose tenets her various enactments of "misbehavior" and transgression resist and subvert. In fact, in her obstinate refusal to marry and "have some babies" to "settle" her down---as her grandmother Eva suggests immediately upon Sula's return to Medallion---Sula, resisting fiercely, insists instead that, rather than "make somebody else," she wants to invent her "self" (92). It is of much critical importance, then, that shortly after Eva encourages Sula to marry, bear children and, thereby, conform to the roles society ascribes to women, Sula, going against all cultural ethics, commits her to a nursing home: "at the sight of Eva being carried out […] Sula [stood] holding some papers against the wall, at the bottom of which, just above the word 'guardian,' she very carefully wrote *Miss* Sula Mae Peace."[25] Sula's committing Eva to a nursing home, and her taking particular delight in it, illustrates Sula's disregard and contempt for both cultural ethics and (Bottom) communal mores; her pride in and determination to preserve her independence and single-woman status, as is evi-

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[25] Ibid., 94. Emphasis mine.

denced by her careful and deliberate inscription of "Miss" on the documents; and, her unwillingness to allow exterior forces, even her own grandmother, to threaten her agency and infringe upon her lifestyle, autonomy, and woman-freedom.

Yet, Sula's transgressive behavior does not end here. For, "with a twist that was all her own imagination, she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her" (118). In her quest to please herself, she, upon her return to the Bottom, disrupts social "norms," violates the community's standards, defies convention, scorns mediocrity, and refuses the gender role.[26] A wander and neither wife nor mother, she exists incongruously with the women of her community and, concomitantly, "violates" the Bottom community sanctions. For, besides having committed Eva to a nursing home---for which the community "shook their heads and said Sula was a roach" (112)---, Sula sleeps with other women's husbands (including Nel's), wears no underwear to church functions and, far worse by the community standards, has sex with white men:

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[26] Washington, *Midnight Birds: Stories of Contemporary Black Women Writers* (New York: Anchor, 1980), 154.

> But it was the men who gave her the final label, who fingerprinted her for all time. They were the ones who said she was guilty of the unforgivable thing---the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion. The route from which there was no way back, the dirt that could not ever be washed away. They say that Sula slept with white men. […] They insisted that all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable. (112-113)

Sula's alleged sexual "escapades" with white men diametrically opposes the classical black female script, which explicitly demands black women's sexual fidelity---to black men---as a way of countering dominant society's stigmatization, denigration, and association of black women with sexual deviance and pathology. Sula's putative willful participation in sexual intercourse with white men is, then, a direct "violation" of "the community, ironically enough, because it is consistent with the dominant culture's exploitation of black women and black female sexuality."[27] Moreover, it is worth calling particular attention to the fact that black men in the Bottom "label" and castigate Sula for her sexual "indiscretions," yet when Sula's mother Hannah participated in "illicit" sex, "the men," as the narratorial voice asserts, "never gossiped about her. She

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[27] Jenkins, 79.

[Hannah] was unquestionably a kind and generous woman and that, coupled with her extraordinary beauty and funky elegance of manner, made them [the men] defend her and protect her from any vitriol that newcomers or their wives might spill" (44-45).

Thus, these same Bottom men's tolerance for, and even defense and protection of Hannah's character, inveritably contrasts their treatment of Sula, to whom they offer absolute intolerance, derision, and reproach. Their inability to tolerate or exonerate Sula and her sexual "misbehavior" has, in fact, far greater implications. Firstly, Sula's ostensible sexual interactions with *white* men elicits unfavorable responses from her Bottom community, in particular black men, namely because her sexual "indiscretions" are in direct conflict with the community's goals towards racial/communal advancement; and so, Sula's sexual "misconduct" with white, rather than black, men contributes to, if not justifies, dominant culture's exclusion of black people from the privileges of citizenship, as well as civic and political subjectivity. Secondly, and of even greater magnitude, is that Sula's supposed "misbehavior" with white men utterly opposes black nationalist narratives of the black family and black women's expected role in its construction, as Wahneema Lubiano contends:

> Black heterosexual masculinity and desire are represented in black nationalist accounts as the foundation of "the black people" via the establishment of strong black families with strong (and responsible) black patriarchs who will be the means by which the black family is saved. In this construction a family is perceived (and represented) as "weakened" by black female deviance (sexual and economic) or as "weakened" by external forces.[28]

Sula's (assumed) intentional willingness to "sleep with" white men is perceived, then, as a direct threat to the black family, as cultural nationalists imagine it, and is, as thus, regarded as a deliberate and intolerable betrayal of the black race. And, it is, in part, for these very reasons that Sula's supposed act is, in the community's perception, inexcusable and unforgivable.

It is, in fact, worth noting here that---while Sula's (and other black women's) sexual "misconduct" with white men are perceived by the community, namely its male constituency, as threatening and intolerable behavior for black women---black men's own sexual interactions with white women are not perceived as such and do not, therefore, present similar ramifications. For, as the novel's narratorial voice contends, one might think that "the will-

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[28] Wahneema Lubiano, "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense: Policing Ourselves and Others" in *The House That Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (1997; New York: Vintage, 1998), 245.

ingness of black men to lie in the beds of white women [would be] a consideration that might lead them [black men] towards tolerance" (113). Yet, this is not the case, since in nationalist discourse and ideology, women---*not* men--- "are typically construed," as Anne McClintock maintains, "as the symbolic bearers of the nation […] as biological reproducers of the members of national collectivities," and, of even greater magnitude, "as reproducers of the boundaries of national groups (through restrictions on sexual or marital relations) […]."[29]

In several regards, then, this demonstrates Morrison's conscious and deliberate attempts to not only dialogize but critique, via Sula, black nationalist ideologies and proclivities that, both consciously and inadvertently, (re)inscribe and (re)inforce patriarchal and masculinist notions, as well as the classical black female script. For, Morrison's efforts to destabilize and resist nationalist tendencies that, at times, emphasize black men's oppression over or at the expense of black women is certainly evident in Sula's response to Jude's "observation that a Negro man had a hard row to hoe in this world" (103). And so, while Nel---following the protocol of the classical

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[29] Anne McClintock, "Family Feuds: Gender Nationalism and the Family," *Feminist Review* 45 (Autumn 1993), 69.

black female script---placates her husband's "whiney tale that peaked somewhere between anger and a lapping desire for comfort," Sula refuses to either commiserate or sympathize with Jude but asserts instead,

> "I mean, I don't know what the fuss is about. I mean, everything in the world loves you. White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger's privates. And if that ain't love and respect I don't know what is. And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed. I knew a white woman wouldn't leave the house after 6 o'clock for fear one of you would snatch her. Now ain't that love? They think rape soon's they see you, and if they don't get the rape they looking for, they scream it anyway just so the search won't be in vain. Colored women worry themselves into bad health just trying to hang on to your cuffs. Even little children---white and black, boys and girls---spend all their childhood eating their hearts out 'cause they think you don't love them. And if that ain't enough, you love yourselves. Nothing in this world loves a black man more than another black man. You hear of solitary white men, but niggers? Can't stay away from one another a whole day. So. It looks to me like you the envy of the world." (103-104)

Morrison---via Sula's hyperbolic and patronizing remarks, which deliberately trivialize the black male experience---destabilizes and subverts the discourse of some black cultural nationalists who, in their efforts to re-

claim their lost masculinity, emphasize the oppression of black men, while severely minimizing, if not neglecting, black women's own experiences as historically marginalized and oppressed. Furthermore, Sula's remarks demonstrate her subversive nature and transgressive behavior once again; for, unlike Nel, Sula dismisses entirely the classical black female script and what it specifies as protocol for black women in that she [Sula] refuses to be loyal---both physically and, in this case, emotionally---to black men. For, rather than commiserate with and placate Jude, she patronizes him instead, and (over)minimizes the black male experience, as Madhu Dubey contends:

> Sula exposes Jude's complicity in his victimization, and offers a startling perspective on the black man as "the envy of the world [...]," which defamiliarizes the contemporary nationalist discourse on the black man [...]. This discourse constructing the black man as "the number one object of racism," assigned the black woman the subsidiary role of healing the black man's damaged masculinity. [...] Sula's deliberate misreading of Jude's narrative is a double-edged gesture: her refusal to be the hem of the black man's garment displaces the masculinist emphasis on black nationalist discourse, but her negation of Jude's victim identity accords with the black nationalist goal of fashioning a new black identity free of the oppressive past.[30]

While Morrison challenges and deconstructs black cultural nationalist discourse and ideologies surrounding the black family and constructions of (black) manhood and womanhood, she provides, concomitantly, a counter-paradigmatic alternative to nationalist configurations of black masculinity and femininity, which she does deftly in her delineation of Ajax and Sula's non-patriarchal relationship. For, despite the fact that Ajax is nine years Sula's senior---"she was twenty-nine, he thirty-eight" (124)---, their relationship is not based on hierarchical or hegemonic notions of male authority and female subordination but, rather, on gender egalitarianism; and so, in this regard, their relationship is not stymied by but precludes certain patriarchally and socially mandated proscriptions for women.

It is, in fact, of much critical significance that Ajax's attraction to Sula stems, interestingly enough, as the narratorial voice asserts, from Sula's "elusiveness and indifference to established behavior" (127); for, with the exception of Ajax's mother, a conjure woman, Sula is "perhaps the only other woman [Ajax] knew whose life was her own, who could deal with life efficiently, and who was not

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[30] Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), 52-53.

interested in nailing him" (127). And so, it is precisely because Ajax, unlike any other men, treats Sula both as a woman who owns herself and his equal, rather than as an object or extension of himself, that Sula is attracted to him and finds that which she had not found in previous relationships with men---pleasure, contentment, fulfillment and, above all, unconditional acceptance:

> [B]ut [Sula's] real pleasure was the fact that [Ajax] talked to her. They had genuine conversations. He did not speak down to her or at her, nor content himself with puerile questions about her life or monologues of his own activities. Thinking she was possibly brilliant, like his mother, he seemed to expect brilliance from her, and she delivered. All in all of it, he listened more than he spoke. His clear comfort at being in her presence, […] his refusal to baby or protect her, his assumption that she was both tough and wise---all of that coupled with a wide generosity of spirit only occasionally erupting into vengeance sustained Sula's interest and enthusiasm. (127-128)

And so, it is namely because Ajax, as a gender-progressive man, not only views but accepts and encourages Sula's complex, transgressive nature---as "brilliant," autonomous, "tough," unconventional and, most importantly, complete---that enables Sula to engage, both comfortably and unrestrained, in her relationship with Ajax. After all, Sula's receptivity to and behavior with Ajax does not

remotely resemble any of her previous (inter)actions with other men---whom she usually used then discarded---because these men, unlike Ajax, only objectified, sexualized, and longed to dominate her. It is precisely because of Ajax's treatment of Sula, then, that allows her to consider, if not desire, what she never before had, as Morrison herself avers:

> [T]he one man who talked to [Sula], and thought she was worthy of conversation, and who let her be, was the one man she could relate to on that level that would make her want something she had never been interested in before, which was a permanent relationship. [Ajax] was a man who was not intimidated by her; he was interested in her. He treated her as a whole person, [...] not as a vessel, not as a symbol of himself. He was secure enough and free enough and bright enough---he wasn't terrorized by her because she was odd. He was interested. [...] When a man is whole himself, when he's touched the borders of his own life, and he's not proving something to somebody else---white men or other men and so on---then the threats of emasculation, the threats of castration, the threats of something taking over disappear.[31]

In her "unconventional" characterization of Ajax, and his relationship with Sula, what Morrison does provide, ultimately, is an alternative (re)configuration of black man-

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[31] Morrison, "'Intimate Things," 385.

hood and womanhood outside nationalist constructions, the classical black female script, and other social modalities that determine these constructs. In her assessment of Ajax and Sula's relationship, and especially Ajax's openness to Sula---and the agency, woman-freedom, and unconventionality she engenders---Morrison indicts and critiques those black cultural nationalists who, in their quest to (re)claim black manhood, have internalized hegemonic ideologies and, thereby, view liberated black women as both threatening and emasculatory. For, "it must be emphasized that the black men who are most worried about castration and emasculation," as bell hooks purports, "are those who have completely absorbed white supremacist patriarchal definitions of masculinity."[32]

Because Ajax is uncategorically secure and free in himself and his manhood---and is, therefore, not concerned about threats of "castration" or "emasculation"---he provides Sula space in which to grow even deeper and more intensely, especially in terms of her sexuality. For, though Sula had, prior to her relationship with Ajax, gone "to bed with men as frequently as she could" (122), she was filled constantly with "utmost irony and outrage in lying

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[32] hooks, "Reconstructing Black Masculinity" in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End, 1992), 93.

under someone, in a position of surrender" (123). Yet, when involved sexually with Ajax, Sula experiences, instead, passion and uninhibited sexual ecstasy. For, unlike Sula's previous sexual partners,

> [Ajax] liked for [Sula] to mount him so he could see her towering above him […]. As she rocked there, swayed there, like a Georgia pine on its knees, high above the slipping, falling smile […], rocking, swaying, she focused her thoughts to bar the creeping disorder that was flooding her hips. […] Letting her thoughts dwell on his face in order to confine, for just a while longer, the drift of her flesh toward the high silence of orgasm. (129-130)

Whereas Sula had, prior to her relationship with Ajax, waited impatiently for other sexual partners---whose names she could not recall during sex---to "disengage" and "turn away and settle into a wet skim of satisfaction […], her sexual experiences with Ajax enable her to embrace an intimate, more intense, and empowering "postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony" (123).

Thus, for Sula, sex with Ajax is no longer merely "sex for sex's sake," but becomes, instead, a conduit by which she enters a deeper, richer, more powerful and intense relationship with herself. For, via her erotic and sexual intimacy with Ajax, Sula gains a profound awareness of her

own subjectivity and intimate self-knowledge through a certain self-referential gratification she finds in sex. For, as Audre Lorde insists in her pathbreaking essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," the erotic offers,

> [...] a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough. [It is] a source of power and information [...] a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.[33]

In Sula's relationship with Ajax, and more specifically via their erotic and sexual intimacy, she discovers---or, better yet, *recovers*---the fullness, intensity, self-awareness, and empowerment that the erotic and sexual experiences provide, yet her community---and, the sexual repressiveness of the classical black female script---denies her. Thus, Sula's constant search and desire for "that version of herself" to which she "sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand" (121) finally comes to fruition. For, this "version of herself" that she seeks to

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[33] Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: Crossing, 1984), 54-55.

"touch"---which has, in itself, masturbatory implications---does not coincide with prevailing social and communal definitions of "woman," nor with the classical black female script and its strictures. And so, because Sula transgresses these myopic and severely proscriptive social modalities---and becomes the embodiment of erotic power and sexual freedom---she is, to advert to Mary Helen Washington's argument, threatening, deviant, and destructive. For, as Audre Lorde further avers, "[O]f course, women so empowered are dangerous."[34]

"New World Black and New World Woman": Sula and the Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity

In "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity" of *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, bell hooks differentiates between opposition and resistance, neither of which is, as she specifies, synonymous with subjectivity. For, the process of becoming subjects, as hooks contends, emerges as one comes to comprehend the ways in which matrixes of domination work in one's own life, "as one invents new, alternative habits of being, and resists from

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[34] Ibid., 55.

that marginal space of difference inwardly defined."[35] By hooks' definition alone, then, Sula---as a radical agent who transgresses convention and societal definitions of "normative" behavior for women---typifies radical black subjectivity. For, she understands well the simultaneity of oppressions confronting her as a black woman, and it is out of this realization that she rejects her marginalization, as hooks herself maintains:

> Sula challenges every restriction imposed upon her, transgressing all boundaries. Defying conventional notions of passive female sexuality, she asserts herself as desiring subject. Rebelling against enforced domesticity, she chooses to roam the world, to remain childless and unmarried. Refusing standard sexist notions of the exchange of female bodies, she engages in the exchange of male bodies as part of a defiant effort to displace their importance.[36]

Despite hooks' recognition of Sula's unwillingness to accept or capitulate to the social modalities and communal proscriptions ascribed to blacks and women, she later asserts---in ways that contradict, if not betray, her earlier assessment of radical black subjects---that Sula does *not* constitute radical black female subjectivity. Attempting,

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[35] hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity" in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End, 1990), 15.

[36] hooks, "Revolutionary," 48.

then, to justify her claim that Sula is not a radical black female subject, hooks purports that,

> Even though readers of *Sula* witness her self-assertion and celebration of autonomy, which Sula revels in even as she is dying, we also know that she is not self-actualized enough to stay alive. Her awareness of what it means to be a radical subject does not cross the boundaries of public and private; hers is a privatized self-discovery.[37]

hooks' reader-response critical approach, as well as her characterological assessment of Sula, presents, I contend, at least two dilemmas: first, hooks equates, be it deliberately or inadvertently, existential or metaphysical notions of living/being with actualization; and so, Sula's dying---or, "inability" to live---serves, in hooks' assessment, as an indication of Sula's lack of self-actualization, which is certainly not the case. Secondly, and of even greater magnitude, hooks purports that Sula's "self-discovery" is "privatized" and, thereby, fails to extend beyond public and private boundaries. Yet, the personal *is* political, as a plethora of scholars and second-wave feminists have argued convincingly; and, it is, in fact, precisely because Sula's personal "indiscretions" and recalcitrant actions are *not* privatized---and are, therefore, exposed to and

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[37] Ibid.

open for public consumption and display---that her personal transgressions take on political significance and elicit public and communal responses as well.

hooks' assertion regarding Sula's revelry in her "self-assertion" and "celebration of autonomy" is, however, salient: for, even on her deathbed, Sula claims and asserts, both unapologetically and boldly, her right to subjectivity. In her final conversation with Nel, which occurs, for instance, shortly before Sula's death, Sula expresses no regrets about the unconventional and transgressive lifestyle in which she has led. For, despite the fact that she is an anathema in the Bottom---namely because she has "violated" practically all of the social "norms" and standards that her community upholds---, Sula (still) offers no apologies but, rather, takes particular pride in her unconventional status. And so, whereas other black women---who had lived traditional lives as wives and mothers---"had had the sweetness sucked from their breath" (122) and were dying, Sula, even in her ill-stricken state, differentiates herself from these and other black women, and articulates that she, unlike them, will die triumphantly: "I know what every colored woman in this country is doing. […] Dying. Just like me. But the difference is

they dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world" (143).

In addition to Sula's having lived, and determination to die, dangerously free, she---upon Nel's challenging her to name exactly what she has to show for her autonomous lifestyle, specifically her single, independent-woman status---asserts, "Show? To who? Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on it in. Which is to say, I got me" (143). Moreover, upon Nel's assumption that Sula's having her "self" and practically nothing besides that must be absolutely lonely, Sula even *claims* her loneliness, asserting "Yes. But my lonely is *mine*" (143). Sula's sentiments regarding having practically nothing---no financial wealth, no husband, no children---but owning, instead, her "self" and her "lonely" are, in various respects, revolutionary concepts, especially for women:

> The idea of a woman owning herself, to have to prove nothing to anyone else, to be completely self-contained and self-loved, is a dangerous idea. It flies in the face of everything women are taught their whole lives---to be selfless, subservient, self-sacrificing. [...] Morrison challenges her readers to shift their thinking in order to see that even lonely isn't an either/or binary---either lonely or not lonely---but that one's type of lonely

> depends on one's freedom or conformity.[38]

And so, for these reasons precisely, Sula, as her author intends, constitutes radical black subjectivity. For, not only does Sula comprehend the matrixes of domination confronting her as a black woman, but she invents new alternative habits of being; resists marginalization; negotiates uncharted territory; challenges assumptions; disdains binaries; destabilizes patriarchy; and, repudiates the classical black female script and its confines. In so doing, not only does she transgress convention but claims and asserts her right, as a woman, to radical black subjectivity.

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[38] Bliss, 47.

CHAPTER III

TOWARDS AN AESTHETIC OF TRANSGRESSION: ANN ALLEN SHOCKLEY'S *LOVING HER* AND THE POLITICS OF SAME-GENDER LOVING

> [W]e know more about the elision of sexuality by black women than we do about the possible varieties of expression of sexual desire. Thus what we have is a very narrow view of black women's sexuality.
>
> --Evelynn Hammonds [1]

> The differences made by race in self-representation and identity argue for the necessity to examine, question, or contest the usefulness and/or the limitations of current discourses on lesbian and gay sexualities […]; from there, we could then go on to recast or reinvent the terms of our sexualities, to construct another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual.
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> --Teresa de Lauretis [2]

Rigid discourses on sexuality do not provide apt paradigms to either capture or illuminate the complex terrain of black women's sexuality, which has both historically and contemporaneously been hypervisible, yet paradoxically sup-

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[1] Evelynn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *African American Literary Theory: A Reader,* ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York UP, 2000), 488.

[2] Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities, An Introduction," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3.2 (1991): iv, x.

pressed and shrouded in dissemblance.[3] If it is difficult to examine the, oftentimes, "nebulous" circumstances surrounding black women's intimate lives, how, given the limitations of discourses on sexuality, do we analyze black women's complicated sexual relationships with women? For, sexual categorizations such as "straight," "lesbian," "bisexual," and "queer" not only inscribe certain racial and class implications, but these labels, I argue, do not always encompass the essence of black women's sexualities or own self-established identities.[4] As such, these sexual

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[3] See Hammonds; Tricia Rose, *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk about Sexuality and Intimacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003); and, Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004). For discussions of dissemblance and black women's sexuality, see Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New, 1995); and Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham, "The Politics of Respectability," *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), 185-229.

[4] Hammonds argues that lesbian and gay studies, in general, display "consistently exclusionary practices" in that "the canonical terms and categories of the field: 'lesbian,' 'gay,' 'butch,' 'femme,' 'sexuality,' and 'subjectivity' are stripped of context in the works of those theorizing about these very categories, identities, and subject positions. Each of these terms is defined with white as the normative state of existence," 483. See also Abdul R. JanMohamed, "Sexuality on/of the Racial Border: Foucault, Wright, and the Articulation of 'Racialized Sexuality," *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to AIDS*, ed. Domna C. Stanton (1992; Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995), 16; and Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3.4: 437-466, in which Cohen examines the efficacy of "queer" for black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender poli-

categories or subject positions further obfuscate, rather than delineate and reflect, the particularities of black women's sexual lives.

Responding to these limitations, as well as both Hammonds' and de Lauretis' requests for terminologies and discursive lens to further explore the sexual, in this chapter I provide---under the rubric "same-gender loving"---an analytical framework by which to examine the intricacies of certain sexual intimacies between women. By same-gender loving, I mean those sexual engagements---between individuals, regardless of their *perceived* sexual orientation, of the same gender---marked by same-sex desire and physical sexual acts, accompanied by either an absence or presence of sexual fidelity, commitment, and/or romantic love.[5] What same-gender loving does as an analytic, then,

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tics as it relates to issues of gender, sexuality, and social class.

[5] Within the context of this chapter, my use of same-gender loving, as it relates to the specific characters' relationship, involves a presence of sexual-relational faithfulness, commitment, and love. My conception of "love" builds, in part, upon its denotative meaning as defined in *American Heritage Dictionary*, 3rd edition: 1. A deep, tender, ineffable feeling of affection and solicitude toward a person [...]. 2. A feeling of intense desire and attraction toward a person with whom one is disposed to make a pair; the emotion of sex and romance. 3.a. Sexual passion. b. Sexual intercourse. c. A love affair (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 1064. Broadly speaking, same-gender loving applies to physical sexual intimacies anywhere along the emotional-committal continuum, ranging from short- to long-term liaisons to those that fall in-between.

is provide a discursive paradigm by which to capture and analyze the nuances and complexities of particular sexual acts between individuals that are, given the rigidity of sexual labels, otherwise overlooked or misinterpreted.[6] As an analytic, same-gender loving is apt and pragmatic in that it enables a critical examination of the sexual subjects and their sexual intimacies and, as such, offers insight into the specificity of certain sexualities. To this end, same-gender loving not only challenges rigid sexual categories and discourses on sexuality, but also expands our limited knowledge, conceptualizations, and theorizations regarding the sexual.

Delineating and contextualizing same-gender loving, this chapter utilizes *Loving Her* (1974) to examine the ways in which Ann Allen Shockley inscribes, complicates, and polemicizes same-gender loving as an aesthetic of transgression in her novel. For, in her creation of a black female

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[6] Same-gender loving as an analytic responds to Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall's request that "interpretations of same-gender sexual and emotional bondings among persons of African descent […] take into consideration the cultural specificity of Western categories of sexual identity such as 'heterosexual,' 'homosexual,' 'lesbian,' and 'bisexual,' which have particular meanings in a U.S. context." Failure to recognize that sexual behaviors have different meanings outside Western/American contexts contributes to misinterpretations and skewed perceptions of these sexual acts. See Cole and Guy-Sheftall, "Black, Lesbian, and Gay: Speaking the Unspeakable," *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities* (New York: Ballantine, 2003), 165.

protagonist engaged in an interracial same-gender loving relationship, Shockley, I contend, produces a character who transgresses convention and circumscriptions for women; subverts nationalists ideologies regarding sexuality, (wo)manhood, family and "the nation"; and, challenges essentialist binaries that characterize same-sex desire, homoeroticism, and homosexuality within a non-black or otherwise "white" context.[7]

"What's in a Name?": Same-Gender Loving---A Context

The Black Power and Gay Liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s challenged and redefined identity politics, especially the meanings of "blackness" and "homosexuality" respectively, outside dominant society's myopically racist and heterosexist conceptualizations of racial and sexual identities. Yet, neither of these movements did much to

[7] I understand "nationalist ideologies" to be a loaded term that subsumes the varied facets of nationalism into an absolute, singular, homogenous ideology. "Nationalism" or "nationalist" left unqualified does not reveal the range or epistemological differences and/or continuities between the various strands---cultural, revolutionary, bourgeois reformist, religious, territorial---of nationalism. My use of "nationalism" and its derivatives refers, then, largely to black cultural nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as larger nationalist discourse. For a typology of black nationalism, see John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, eds. *Black Nationalism in America* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970); also Dean E. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001). For discussions of nationalism at large, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

create a space to empower individuals who were, at once, blacks and "sexual minorities" in American society. For, black nationalist discourse, a major ideological and discursive component of Black Power, usually denoted heteronormativity as a requisite for its essentialized notion of "blackness," while the term "gay" within the rhetoric of gay liberationists almost always connoted "whiteness".[8]

While heterosexuality constituted "normative" sexual behavior in the Black Power movement and black nationalist thought, within the Black Panther Party lesbians and gay men also served, sometimes openly, in positions of authority. For, as David Hilliard, Black Panther Party founding member and chief of staff, posits, "'There were gay operatives in the Black Panther Party working at the highest levels of leadership. […] Still, no one ever asked you to define your sexual orientation. We didn't divide ourselves like that. First and foremost you were a Black Panther.'"[9] Hilliard's remarks, though problematic, complicate at best the organization's stance surrounding sexuality within the movement: that is, the Party (and movement) was not exclu-

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[8] Hammonds; Barbara Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1998).

[9] Quoted in Carbado, Devon W., Dwight A. McBride, and Donald Weise, eds. *Black Like Us: A Century of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual African American Fiction.* (San Francisco: Cleis, 2002), 113.

sively heterosexual and its constituents were not required to specify their sexual orientation; yet, its prioritization of race and racial solidarity precluded, if not completely dismissed, the intersectionality *and* indivisibility of race and sexuality. To this end, the Black Panther Party, reflective of the larger Black Power movement, further compartmentalized race and sexual orientation into an "either/or" binary for black sexual minorities within both the movement and America itself. And so, while the movement succeeded unequivocally in transforming the racial, socio-cultural, political, and class consciousness of black people, it concomitantly failed to comprehend and acknowledge the sexual politics within the movement and the black community at large.[10]

The Gay Liberation movement, on the other hand, offered a valuable discourse on sexual politics and challenged the stigmatization attached inextricably to homosexuality. Yet, as a largely white (upper) middle-class urban movement, whose ideologies reflected these demographics, it was largely inattentive to the needs of its non-

[10] Cheryl Clarke, "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community," *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (1983; New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2000), 192.

white, non-middle class sexual minorities.[11] In fact, it did little to break away from social stratifications predicated on race and class and to articulate a racialized sexuality. As such, it largely conflated homosexuality and sexual labels such as "gay" and "lesbian" with whiteness. Thus, white middle-class sexual minorities came to define and represent, if not constitute, "the gay identity". And, black sexual minorities in the Gay Liberation struggle, similar to those in the Black Power movement, were trapped within what Barbara Smith identifies as the "contradictions" and "invisibilities" of being black and gay: further silenced, excluded, and marginalized by the homophobia and pervasive racism in the black and gay movements, respectively.[12]

Pat Parker, in *Movements in Black*, critiques the compartmentalization of identities, namely race and sexual

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[11] Analyzing the ways in which "[gay and lesbian] magazines of the 1960s" galvanized around propagating images of a unified and representative gay and lesbian body, Rodger Streitmatter asserts that, "Gay people vary widely with respect to factors such as age, socioeconomic level, education, and geographic location. And yet, in order for progress to be made, these diverse individuals ultimately must coalesce to form a single community." Streitmatter's commentary reflects at best the absence of the signifier race in politics surrounding gay and lesbian identities, and evidences gay and lesbian communities' largely inattentive stances toward racialized sexualities. See Streitmatter, "Building a Lesbian and Gay Community," *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995), 71.

[12] Smith, 126.

orientation, as well as the exclusivity especially in black and homosexual communities; and, she articulates poignantly the ways in which black sexual minorities are "othered" and displaced---either because of their race or sexual orientation---almost inevitably within black and gay communities, which are sedimented deeply and problematically with hegemony:

> If I could take all my parts with me when I go somewhere, and not have to say to one of them, "No, you stay home tonight, you won't be welcome," because I'm going to an all-white party where I can by gay, but not Black. Or I'm going to a Black poetry reading, and half the poets are antihomosexual, or thousands of situations where something of what I am cannot come with me. The day all the different parts of me can come along, we would have what I would call a revolution.[13]

While Parker critiques structures that demand and perpetuate the compartmentalizing of black sexual minorities' multiple consciousnesses or identities, she, perhaps most significantly, calls critical attention to the revolutionary possibilities of a *simultaneous* racial and (homo)sexual identity. In fact, it is precisely this revolutionary notion of foregrounding both racial and sexual identities concomitantly, rather than negating or situating them

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[13] Pat Parker, *Movement in Black* (Freedom: Crossing, 1983), 11.

within hierarchical or diametrically oppositional categories, that accounts, in part, for the recent yet severely under-considered discourse on same-gender loving.

As a concept, same-gender loving materialized in the early 1990s as a conduit for black sexual minorities---black women who love women (sexually and emotionally) and black men who love men (sexually and emotionally)---to articulate their sexuality in ways that resonate with the distinctiveness of black culture and life.[14] Thus, same-gender loving, unlike the black and gay liberation movements and discourses, is attentive to *both* the intersectionality and inseparability of racial and sexual identity. As such, same-gender loving does not marginalize individuals or demand the prioritization of either racial or sexual identity, but rather it provides an un-negotiated space for black sexual minorities to celebrate the totality of their experiences, struggles, multiple identities, and subject positions.

While same-gender loving does not eradicate the pervasive homophobia, heterosexism, or racism sedimenting American society and culture, it challenges these oppressive forces and, thereby, serves as a practical and ideological

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[14] See http://members.aol.com/blacksgl/sgl.htm

site of resistance. For, it forces the black community to acknowledge the multiplicity and diverse ways of loving and sexuality; and, rather than endure the ethnic invisibility that sexual labels, gay and lesbian discourses, and queer theory largely produce, same-gender loving allows for a more inclusive self-definition of black sexuality.[15] Thus,

> [It is in] this spirit of self-naming, an ethnic/sexual pride, [that] the term "same-gender-loving" (SGL) was introduced to fortify the lives and illuminate the voices of homosexual and bisexual people of color; to provide a powerful identi[t]y not marginalized by "racism" in the gay community or "homophobic" attitudes in society. […] It is the intention of the [same gender loving] movement to break this cycle.[16]

Black sexual minorities' engagement of same-gender loving has, therefore, myriad socio-cultural and political implications, especially since it acknowledges both sameness *and* difference and resists the essentialism---in terms of race and sexuality---that black nationalist and gay, lesbian, and queer discourses and practices largely occlude.[17]

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[15] Hammonds, 483-486.

[16] Refer to footnote 14.

[17] Joseph Bristow, ed. *Sexual Sameness: Textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), 2. Bristow asserts that "making connections between *sameness* and *difference* (and both terms have their complications), […] signals the overlapping concerns of discrete subcultures." While he relates sameness and difference to "lesbian" and "gay," it is also relevant to same-gender loving which also "designate[s] entirely dif-

The revolutionary possibilities of same-gender loving lies, then, in its ability to draw critical and necessary attention to racialized same-sex acts and illuminate the realities of black sexuality, rather than problematically and myopically reduce individuals to confining sexual labels, identifiers, or taxonomies. For, even the term "homosexual" itself emerged, as Michel Foucault avers, as a (clinical) description for a type of individual, rather than a sexual activity.[18] Thus, same-gender loving, unlike most sexual categories, resists and avoids the all-too-pervasive proclivity to define and demarcate individuals on the basis of sexual orientation or, far worse, to reduce individuals, specifically black sexual minorities, merely and inevitably to a sexuality.

What same-gender loving does, then, is expand the ways in which we conceptualize black sexual desire, eroticism, and loving; and, it resists and destabilizes the politics of silence surrounding black (female) sexuality that has long persisted. As a conceptual, discursive, and analytical framework, same-gender loving forces us to engage sexuality and gender discourses seen primarily as disclosures

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ferent desires, physical pleasures, oppressions, and visibilities."

[18] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 43.

in the black community and society at large.[19] And, it enables us to discuss with depth and accuracy the particularities of black sexual lives, intimacies, and desires without being stymied by sexual labels, silences, or boundaries.

Replete with revolutionary possibilities and potential, same-gender loving, as a relatively recent and largely understudied discourse, is not, however, without its ambiguities and tensions. One such ambiguity, at least as it relates to this study, is that the "requisites" for same-gender loving are neither clearly defined nor delineated. For, though created by and for black sexual minorities and people of color, it is not apparent who, in terms of race and ethnicity, can identify with or embrace same-gender loving. To this end, then, it is not clear whether relationships exclusively between black sexual minorities and other people of color constitute same-gender loving only, or if the term applies also to same-sex relationships marked by interracial (black-white) sexual intimacy.

While such uncertainty exists regarding its parameters, my study assumes an anti-essentialist understanding of same-gender loving and, thereby, does not confine its

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[19] Paula Giddings, "The Last Taboo," *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought,* ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New, 1995), 414-428.

applicability to relationships between people of color exclusively but, rather, extends to encompass interracial intimacies between people of color and white sexual minorities. For, "same-gender loving," especially within the context of interracial same-gender intimacies, not only further problematizes limited notions of racialized sexualities---especially interracial (same-sex) relationships, which have been largely overlooked and under-analyzed---but also expands the ways in which we conceive, think, and theorize about the dynamics of race, gender, and sexuality.[20]

Ann Allen Shockley's* Loving Her--- *A Brief Overview

In 1974, Ann Allen Shockley---Tennessee librarian, critic, and fiction writer---published her pioneering novel *Loving Her*, which, as Alycee Lane asserts, is not only "the

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[20] For scholarship on interracial same-sex intimacy, see Robert Reid-Pharr, "Dinge," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8.2, 6 (1996):75-85, in which he analyzes interracial same-sex (sexual) practices as responsible, in part, for the construction and perpetuation of racial and gender identities. See also Darieck Scott, "Jungle Fever? Black Gay Identity Politics, White Dick, and the Utopian Bedroom," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1 (1994): 299-321; Cheryl Clarke, "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance," *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981; New York: Kitchen Table, 1983), 128-137; and Rhonda M. Williams, "Living at the Crossroads: Explorations in Race, Nationality, Sexuality, and Gender," *The House That Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Vintage, 1998), 136-156.

first African American novel written with an explicitly lesbian theme, but [… also] the first to feature a black lesbian as its protagonist."[21] While Shockley does foreground overt lesbian themes instead of addressing them covertly through codification, *Loving Her*, I would argue, does not feature a black lesbian protagonist; rather, it depicts a black woman (Renay Davis) who has been *perceived* historically as a lesbian character. To label Renay a "lesbian" would, in fact, be not only reductive, but also a misnomer at best and epistemologically insufficient at worst. For, Renay, after several years in a heterosexual marriage, engages in an interracial same-sex relationship, and neither expresses nor specifies her own self-established sexual identity. In fact, upon being called a "lesbian" (by a white lesbian who had never before encountered a black one), Renay---who "knew of no visible changes in herself […and…] still talked, looked and acted the same"---asserts that the conclusion had been made "that she was a Lesbian simply because she was with Terry. Wrong judgments had been made that way."[22] What Renay does, then, is problema-

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[21] Alycee J. Lane, foreword, *Loving Her*, by Ann Allen Shockley (1974; Boston: Northeastern UP, 1997), v-xvi.

[22] Ann Allen Shockley, *Loving Her* (1974; Boston: Northeastern UP, 1997), 72. Subsequent references to this novel are cited parenthetically in the text.

tize limited constructions of lesbian identity predicated on (mis)conceptions regarding what constitutes a "lesbian"; and, she demonstrates, more precisely, that she does not embrace the term "lesbian" because it, with all its rigidity and (un)ambiguousness, neither captures nor reflects the complexity of her sexual life, desires, and experiences.

Yet, despite how Renay has been (mis)categorized historically along the homosexual-heterosexual continuum, Shockley creates a protagonist who is a black same-gender loving woman. That alone certainly makes *Loving Her* radical and groundbreaking, especially given the socio-cultural and political contexts out of which it emerged. First, Shockley foregrounds (interracial) same-gender loving and homosexuality in her novel during the Black Power/Black Arts movements, when black writers were expected to espouse and inscribe black aesthetics in their works: to announce "blackness," heighten black consciousness, and promote racial loyalty and solidarity.[23] And, secondly, she foregrounds a black same-gender loving woman protagonist during

[23] Addison Gayle, "Blueprint for Black Criticism," *First World* (January/February 1977): 44, in which Gayle calls for literary characters imbued with black consciousness and "positive" characteristics to debunk stereotypical images of black people. See also Larry Neal, "The Social Background of the Black Arts Movement," *The Black Scholar* (January/February 1987): 11-22.

the Gay Rights movement and, in so doing, confronts and destabilizes representations---propagated by gay liberationists---that conflate homosexuality and same-sex desire with whiteness and (upper) middle-class status. In writing *Loving Her*, then, Shockley dialogizes the ideological discourses of 1960s and 1970s black cultural nationalists and gay liberationists, respectively; and, she subverts essentialist notions of "blackness," black womanhood and the black family, as well as myopic racial- and class-implicated definitions of "gay identity" and same-sex desire.

Alice Walker, in her 1975 laconic review of the novel, asserts that *Loving Her* "has immense value. It enables us to see and understand, perhaps for the first time, the choices certain women have made about how they will live their lives"; and, it "allows us glimpses at physical intimacies between women that have been, in the past, deliberately ridiculed or obscured."[24] Though salient and apt commentary, Walker's remarks were written shortly after the novel's publication. And, with few exceptions, most reviews of *Loving Her*---despite the "immensity" of its value--predate 1980 and are brief, antiquated, relatively inac-

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[24] Alice Walker, "A Daring Subject Boldly Shared." Review of *Loving Her*, by Ann Allen Shockley. *Ms.* (April 1975): 120-124.

cessible, and/or hardly scholarly or meritorious. One might ask, then, why has this seminal text been afforded relatively little critical attention? Why has it been largely overlooked and neglected by scholars, critics, and academicians? And, more significantly, why in the 1970s and 1980s---when African American women writers were flourishing and scholars were recuperating black women authors and their texts---were Ann Allen Shockley and *Loving Her* still not recognized and given critical attention?

A multiplicity of factors---poor publicity and inimical reviews; editorial and regional biases; and, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia---accounts for its neglect and have hindered, for more than a quarter-of-a-century, critical examinations of *Loving Her*.[25] Yet, while literary scholars and critics have dismissed this novel almost entirely, it is, despite any of its shortcomings, a

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[25] Sdiane Bogus' "Theme and Portraiture in the Fiction of Ann Allen Shockley," diss., Miami University, 1988. See also Ann Allen Shockley, "The Black Lesbian in American Literature: An Overview," *Home Girls*, 84, in which Shockley conjectures that heterosexism and homophobia were additional factors accounting for the neglect of literature with lesbian themes. For inimical reviews of *Loving Her*, see Jeanne Cordova, Rev. of *Loving Her*, by Ann Allen Shockley. *Lesbian Tide* (October 1974): 28. Refer also to Frank Lamont Phillips, Rev. of *Loving Her*, by Ann Allen Shockley. *Black World* (September 1975): 89-90, in which Phillips scathingly critiques Shockley who as "a librarian at Fisk University" whose "short fiction and articles [have] been published in *Black World*," he contends, "should know better"; for, *Loving Her* is "Bullshit that ought not be encouraged."

seminal text: for, it participates in critical debates on issues affecting black women not simply in the 1960s and 1970s, and provocatively foregrounds same-gender loving, as well as confronts racism, patriarchy and heterosexist institutions that threaten black women's agency.[26] Challenging particular identity politics, as well as subverting narrow definitions of "woman" and "normativity" in American society, *Loving Her* further illuminates black women's multifarious experiences. As such, it not only expands limited constructions of black womanhood, but also serves a consequential role in the tradition of transgressive black women in literature.

The novel opens as Renay Davis, a gifted pianist and devoted mother, leaves her abusive, alcoholic husband Jerome Lee---who embraces black nationalism and articulates masculinist and heterosexist ideologies---for Terry, a white lesbian. Not at all content, Renay transgresses her victimization and convention by taking their seven-year-old daughter Denise and deserting Jerome and their repressive heterosexual marriage. Rather than deny her sexual attrac-

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[26] The novel's shortcomings include but are not limited to stylistics, authorial intrusions and interjections, archaic sexual terms, and largely unmediated ideological stereotypes. For further details, refer to my discussion on pages 126-127; see also Lane, vii-viii, xiii; and Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), 151.

tion to Terry, Renay rejects both essentialized blackness, which her husband espouses, and externally defined definitions of womanhood that label same-gender loving, same-sex desire, and homosexuality as deviant. With Terry, then, Renay finds "what she wanted and needed most. She was now aware of herself and the part she had tried to deny" (28).

In fact, Renay had never been attracted to men and had, on countless occasions, repressed and disguised her feelings. When the star football player and "best-looking boy on campus," Jerome Lee, pursued her relentlessly in college, she capitulated, dating him merely to avoid her roommate's increasingly persistent interrogations of her sexuality: "You *do* like *men*, don't you?" (14). Though Renay despised dating Jerome and especially detested him kissing her, she---in a deliberate performance of male attraction and desire---would on those occasions stand "as stone, feeling nothing, knowing nothing, willing nothing"; for, she was, as the novel's narratorial voice asserts, "only superficially acting out the woman's role she thought she was expected to play in the context of their relationship" (15). Rather than disclose her lack of desire for men---and, consequently, be labeled, shunned, or reduced to a sexuality---Renay, through a pattern of constitutive

acts, performs the gender role socially constructed (in strict heterosexual terms) for women.[27]

During the course of their relationship, Jerome rapes Renay, which leads to her pregnancy and, in turn, accounts for their decision to marry. Once wedded, Renay, miserable within the confines of her forced marriage, is expected to subscribe routinely to Jerome's will and specific gender roles or, otherwise, suffer Jerome's violent beatings. And so, Renay maintains the household, raising their daughter and working to pay the bills, with little assistance from Jerome, who drinks heavily and never secures a steady job. Misdirecting and displacing his resentment (which stems from his inability to support his family and his abandoned dreams of finishing college and becoming a professional athlete) onto Renay, Jerome lambastes her as a panacea for his bruised manhood: "You know we black men have a hard enough time as it is making it in the white man's world. […] I could have been somebody if it wasn't for you. All you castrating black bitches want to keep a man down. *Ruin* him. […] And *you*. What goddam good are *you* to a man? Not even a good screw!" (29).

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[27] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990), 270-282.

In Jerome's highly castigatory remarks (which fail, ironically, to acknowledge that his condition is the ramification of his own doing---his having raped Renay) resonates the myth of the black matriarchy. Promulgated by Daniel Patrick Moynihan and later appropriated by some black nationalists, the myth assumes that black women, in collusion with the white power structure, emasculated black men, thereby preventing them from maintaining their "rightful" position in the black family and society at large.[28] In his evocation of black matriarchy rhetoric, Jerome, as Shockley clearly intends, is equated allegorically with black nationalist discourse, which he epitomizes throughout the novel. Moreover, in his assertion that Renay serves no purpose for men---that she is, as he claims, "not even a good screw"---he not only objectifies her but, like those black nationalists who viewed black women's only position in the movement as "prone," he also reduces her to an ex-

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[28] Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, 1965, in *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, eds. Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey (Cambridge: MIT, 1967). For extended literature by black nationalists known for their unabashed appropriation and propagation of black matriarchy rhetoric, see Nathan Hare, "Will the Real Black Man Please Stand Up?" *The Black Scholar* 2:10 (1971); Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell, 1968); and Robert Staples, "The Myth of the Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists," *The Black Scholar* 10: 6-7 (1979).

tremely marginal sexual role.[29] Compensating, then, for his inadequacy and negligence as a husband, father, and provider, Jerome espouses nationalist ideologies regarding "lost manhood" and asserts himself as patriarch of his household.

Shockley, in her rendering of Renay and Jerome's abusive, patriarchal relationship---and especially her characterization of Jerome as nationalist discourse incarnate---conflates black nationalism with unprogressive politics that, instead of liberating black women, further threatens and violates their agency and autonomy. Yet, readers should not perceive Shockley's characterization of Jerome as indicative of black nationalists' violent stance toward black women. Rather, it best be read metaphorically as a delineation of the ways in which sexist and patriarchal ideologies undergirding nationalism "endanger" black women and pose for them a life of submission to black men within fundamentally in-egalitarian or masculinist constructions of the black family, manhood, and womanhood.

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[29] Stokely Carmichael asserts that, "The position of women in SNCC is prone." Though rendered jokingly, not seriously, Carmichael's remarks reflect some of the prevailing gender politics and ideologies regarding women undergirding the movement. Stokely Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Toure)*, with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell (New York: Scribner, 2003), 431-432.

"a love so bold": Transgression and Politics Interracial Same-Gender Loving

Renay meets Terrence (Terry) Bluvard, a wealthy writer, at the supper club where she plays the piano to earn money to pay the bills. When she receives a song request, accompanied by a twenty-dollar tip and invitation to join Terry at her table, she accepts. Not long afterwards, Terry invites her for a drive, during which she expresses a sexual preference for women and desire for Renay: "'I'm wealthy. I'm used to getting what I want […]. I'm one of those women who prefers her own sex and I want you'" (22). Slightly bemused yet not surprised, Renay reflects on Terry's remarks and, though not responding verbally, thinks that within herself "a desire to be loved and to love existed […]. But could it be met in this form?" (23).

After an episode with Jerome, who threatened to beat her if she did not cook for him and his drinking buddy, Renay acquiesces then leaves for work, where Terry invites her home for a drink. Accepting Terry's offer, Renay accompanies her to her house, where she shares with Terry her revulsion for Jerome, equating her life with him to a "drowning, a wish unfulfilled, a death". In an act of consolation, Terry puts her arms around Renay, who, "surprised by her [own] boldness," insists that Terry not remove them

(26); and, from there, Terry, after first receiving consent and affirmation, kisses Renay, as the narratorial voice describes with detail:

> The mouth meeting [Renay's] was soft like her own and very, very gentle, unlike the hardness she had been accustomed to feeling. Then it increased its pressure and the tongue went into the cavern of her mouth as if it belonged there, joining hers, and the hands brushed over her face and down to her neck where it stopped. Her eyes were closed, and she felt a warmth consume her---a warmth she had never known before. She didn't want Terry to stop. She wanted the lips and hands to return to her---to where they belonged. (27)

Replete with nuances and complexity, this passage disengages heterosexist sensibilities that ascribe stigma and abnormality to same-sex affection and desire; for, rather than reinforce such sentiments, the narratorial voice, as Shockley intends, inscribes a "natural-ness" and normativity to Renay and Terry's kiss that legitimizes their same-gender intimacy. Mainly through the use of a rhetoric of belonging---Terry's tongue belonging in the caverns of Renay's mouth, as well as Renay's wanting Terry's lips and hands to return "where they belonged"---the narratorial consciousness challenges heteronormativity by demonstrating that intimacy and desire are not restricted solely to male-female relationships. This, the narrator, and thereby

Shockley, achieves by juxtaposing Renay and Terry's affectionate exchange with that of Renay and Jerome's---the latter operating as the antithesis of the former. Thus, whereas Jerome's kissing Renay had been marked invariably by a roughness and absence of desire, the kiss shared between Renay and Terry is gentle and sensation-filled, invoking in Renay newly-experienced feelings of undisguised passion, erotic longing and desire.

Yet, Renay's acclimation to physical desire and erotic pleasure goes beyond her and Terry's kiss, extending itself into the sexual ecstasy they subsequently share. Terry, with a double entendre, "'Renay---come,'" escorts her into the bedroom, after which,

> Renay opened her eyes and stood up shakily to follow Terry to the other room. Eyes clouded with passion, she hardly saw the large bed [...] Then Terry undressed her and left her for a cold instant on the smooth white sheets while she quickly threw off her own clothes.
>
> Immediately Terry was beside her again, and she was no longer alone. She closed her eyes, shuddering at the delicate kisses being showered all over her body like light rain.
>
> "You're so golden brown, so beautiful," Terry murmured in the hollow of her neck. [...]
>
> Shyly [Renay] put her arm around Terry, exploring the white body that was new to her---the downy hair like peach fuzz on Terry's back, the strength of her limbs, the small firm-

> ness of her breasts which nestled against her own like twins.
>
> When Terry's hand began feeling, exploring and kneading, [Renay] shut her eyes once more, losing herself in the gloriously strange wonderment of it, lying back and thinking nothing until the pressure of the fingers created a little fire of sensuous pain she hadn't known before […].
>
> […] Then Terry was above her, moving, and just as she had known and wanted this all her life, she matched the love movements of body against body---movements which increased to such an intensity that Renay cried out, startling even herself.
>
> […]
>
> Cradled later in Terry's arms, [Renay] said: "It was the first time I've ever had an orgasm." (27-28)

Densely loaded, this passage serves a multiplicity of functions: first, it "legitimates" same-sex intimacy and destabilizes (heterosexist) hegemonic notions regarding sexuality by centralizing same-gender intercourse. As such, it displaces the perceived fixity of heterosexuality by foregrounding, instead, another paradigm of sexual longing and erotic desire: same-gender loving. Secondly, emphasizing the "pigmentative" qualities of Renay's and Terry's skin---Renay's golden brownness and Terry's whiteness---the narrator reiterates the interracial-ness and (racial) difference between them; yet, it locates their sameness---asserting their breasts were like "twins," signifying their common-ness---especially biologically and physiologically. To

this end, then, the narrator establishes, at once, their sameness and difference within the context of Renay and Terry's interracial same-sex union.

Thirdly, the emphasis on the (sexual) converging of black and white female bodies that have historically been constructed as diametrically oppositional---that is, black and white womanhood(s) as constructed dichotomously and contingent on myths of each other---undermines the history and tensions undergirding the social constructions of both black and white womanhood. Terry's emphasizing the beautiful blackness of Renay's body, and Renay's exploration of the whiteness of Terry's, destabilize socially constructed ideologies regarding black and white femaleness, and argue that race---and in this case gender, as well---neither determines nor precludes sexual longing and desire. Moreover, Renay's and Terry's abilities to transcend race, as well as the (historical) "semiotics" of black and white female bodies, exemplify the nexus of memory, meaning, and the body: that is, that once the body "forgets" (or "unremembers") in its quest for pleasure, it, like Renay's and Terry's bodies, liberates itself from historical memory and reductive social constructions---such as race, gender, and sexuality---that "police" the body; for, what matters, as

Shockley reveals, is not so much shifting social constructions but, rather, how one('s)(body) feels.[30]

Fourthly, Renay and Terry's sexual intimacy disrupts heteronormative sensibilities surrounding sexuality, especially the privileging of male desire and pleasure in heterosexual intercourse. For, Renay and Terry's sexual intimacy is marked by a delicateness and sensuality that creates in Renay intense feelings of passion, erotic desire, and orgasmic ecstasy, which differ significantly from her experiences with Jerome, as she and the narrator contend:

> "I didn't know it *could* be like that---" It had never been with [Jerome]. The hurried mounting of her, the jabbing inside her with the acrid whiskey odor heavy in her nostrils. It had always been over in seconds; then he would turn over and go to sleep. (28, author's emphasis)

Jerome, invested solely in his own self-gratification, exerts a level of dominance and power during sex with Renay, as evidenced by his "mounting" and "jabbing inside" her, which resembles and alludes to her earlier rape (and accounts, in part, for why in their nearly seven years of marriage, Renay never experiences an orgasm with Jerome). Yet, unlike Jerome, Terry is invested in pleasing Renay, who, during their very first sexual experience, reaches un-

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[30] Lane, xii.

precedented sexually climactic heights. In fact, when Renay assumes, during her and Terry's post-intercourse dialogue, that Terry had gotten "nothing out of [sex]," Terry, affirming the contrary, contends instead, "Yes, yes I did. Pleasing you. In time, as we begin to know each other, we'll grow together" (28). Terry's remarks reveal not only the mutually constitutive (sexual) nature of her and Renay's relationship, but also the space that exists in their blossoming friendship for reciprocity in terms of sexual pleasure, accompanied by both sexual/relational growth and longevity. What Shockley does, then, via Renay and Terry's relationship, juxtaposed to Renay and Jerome's, is privilege female desire and (sexual) subjectivity in the former, while excoriating, concomitantly, the ways in which female sexuality is both confined and compromised as the object of male longing and desire in the latter.

With Terry, Renay feels "alive again, living to love, loving to live" (39); and, her experiences with Terry function as both impetus and affirmation for her to leave Jerome: as, "[n]ow she knew she could never [be with Jerome] again, for she [had] found what she wanted and needed most. She was now aware of herself and the part she had tried to deny. So much [...] had been wasted in the past" (28). Unbeknownst to Jerome, then, Renay takes their

daughter Denise and leaves him to live with Terry, her white lesbian lover. Renay's abandoning Jerome, their heterosexist marriage, and nuclear family structure to live with Terry unequivocally mark her transgressive behavior---her defiance of convention and established social norms through her deliberate participation in two "taboos": one, an interracial relationship; and, two, a same-sex union, both of which have far greater social, socio-cultural, and political implications. Reading Renay's behavior especially along the ideological backdrop of (black) nationalism illuminates the ways in which she, via her engagement in an interracial same-sex union, not only transgresses societal circumscriptions for women, but also disrupts nationalist tenets regarding womanhood, the family, and the "nation".

Within the nationalist paradigm, for instance, men and women have diametrically opposing roles. While men generally occupy the domain of power as patriarchs of their household and, thereby, "guardians" of women and children, women are usually ascribed marginalized roles based largely on a reproductive framework, as Tamar Mayer asserts in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism*:

> [W]omen's national importance is based on their reproductive roles, which include biological and ideological repro-

> duction, reproduction of ethnic or national boundaries, transmission of culture and participation in national struggles. Their centrality is also based on women's symbolic status, connected to their reproductive roles, as representatives of purity. Only the pure and modest women can re-produce the pure nation; without purity in biological reproduction the nation clearly cannot survive.[31]

Because Renay engages in a same-sex relationship---that, without exterior interventions, is biologically non-reproductive---she is incapable of producing offspring with Terry; and, because it is also an interracial union, she does not fulfill her "role" as transmitter of culture and nationalist ideologies to her progeny. To this end, she overturns essentialist definitions of "woman" and "womanhood" constructed in strict biological, generative, and (re)productive terms. Moreover, because Renay deliberately diverges from the heteronormative paradigm of sexuality and intimacy, she engages in a so-called deviant lifestyle that seemingly excludes her from nationalist conceptualizations of "purity". Yet, her relationship with Terry is, as the narratorial voice consistently demonstrates, deeply embedded with elements of purity---though not "purity" as it is

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[31] Tamar Mayer, ed. "Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Setting the Stage," *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation* (London: Routledge, 2000), 7.

conceived in the traditional (limited) sense---that collapses any deviant/pure binaries.

Yet, of equal if not greater import, Renay transgresses convention and nationalist ideologies by fostering a relationship, inclusive of her daughter Denise, with Terry; for, she establishes a counter-paradigmatic model of family and, in so doing, disrupts (re)strict(ive) nationalist constructions of both "the family ideal" and "the black family," as they have been imagined. In fact, Renay, Terry, and Denise function, as the narratorial voice illustrates, as a familial unit. Renay and Terry, for instance, are described as "resembl[ing] that of a married couple," serving as joint caretakers of Denise, who refers endearingly to her mother's partner as "Aunt Terry"; and, Terry, on the other hand, "read to [Denise] every night and brought her surprises and took her for drives while Renay cooked dinner" (39). Terry fosters a relationship with Denise, whose own father Jerome was, quite disconcertingly, usually too inebriated or seldom home to cultivate a father-daughter relationship with her. Thus, Renay/Terry/Denise's operating collectively as a familial unit, as well as their domestic lifestyle, challenges what constitutes "family" in American society; de-legitimizes black and larger nationalist constructions of the family

paradigm; and, subverts definitions of "family" that characterize it within an exclusively hetero-patriarchal framework.

Renay's (re)formation of family (Renay/Terry/Denise), read in dialogue with hers and Jerome's (Jerome/Renay/Denise), calls significant attention to the contradictions undergirding nationalist constructions of the black family. For, if, within black nationalist discourse, the foundation and survival of "the black nation" is contingent upon the formation of "strong black families with strong (and responsible) black patriarchs," Jerome---who engages nationalism only so far as its tenets regarding female circumscriptions and male-dominance are concerned---utterly fails to perform his designated role within his family unit.[32] For, he neglects his responsibilities as a husband and father---not supporting his family financially and functioning, moreso, as a violator than "protector" of his wife---and, therefore, does not meet the "requisites" for manhood within the nationalist project. To this end, Jerome's negligent behavior threatens the survival and accounts for the eventual demise of his family. And so, whereas Renay's behavior---her deliberate engagement in an

[32] Wahneema Lubiano, "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense: Policing Ourselves and Others," *The House That Race Built* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 245.

interracial same-gender loving union---is perceived almost automatically as the "real" threat to their family, it is Jerome, ironically, who is ultimately responsible for its destruction. What Shockley does, then, is twofold: first, she exposes the contradictory nature of nationalists who, like Jerome, embrace ideologies regarding (wo)manhood, family, and the nation that rarely, if ever, translate---at least, in any meaningful or progressive way---into praxis. And, secondly, she reveals the potentially precarious and destructive, rather than generative, nature of black nationalist constructions of gender roles and family, in particular, and of nationalism itself, in general.

In fact, Shockley excoriates nationalists proclivities to relegate women to in-egalitarian, unprogressive gender politics that commodify or render them objects to be acquired, possessed, and/or disposed at men's will, while women are expected to exercise no such agency. This, she does most conspicuously via Jerome's reaction to his discovery that Renay has abandoned him, as the narratorial voice delineates:

> His male vanity had once again risen to the surface. He just *knew* she was coming back. She *had* to come back. It would have been all right if *he* had left *her*, but he could not believe that *she* had left *him*. That she would not be with him anymore and, above all,

> that she could go the way of the world without him, was inconceivable to him. She was a commodity to him, something he had bought with a wedding license and, like all possessions, was a part of his many belongings. To him, losing her was a loss of property. (42, original emphasis)

Jerome's narrow conceptualizations of Renay is symptomatic of a larger masculinist (gender) hierarchy in nationalism(s) that characterizes women as "feminized entities" or objects that "emphatically, historically, and globally---are the property of men."[33] For, in Jerome's failure to view---and thereby treat---Renay within a politics of equality, he subscribes instead to a male proprietor/female commodity binary, as evidenced through his conceptions of Renay within a discourse of possession: that is, his categorizing her as a "belonging," "commodity," and "loss of property". Renay's deliberate abandonment of Jerome---and especially her assertion that, "'I'm not coming back, Jerome Lee. Ever. I'm getting a divorce"---uncharacteristically marks, then, her progression in that she expresses, for the first time verbally, her refusal to acquiesce to Jerome and serve as a mere extension of him; and, of far greater significance, it signifies her disavowal of nationalist and larger (American) societal ten-

[33] Mayer, 2.

dencies that, in the process of nation-building, do so at the objectification and disempowerment of women.

Moreover, Shockley indicts black nationalists, like Jerome, who, in their construction of family and nation, insufficiently break with dominant patriarchal ideologies that results, therefore, in the (re)inscription and enforcement of an unequal distribution of power between black men and women. This, the author does via Renay's stance toward Jerome's request for her to "C'mon home":

> "Why?" she asked. He had said nothing about being sorry. Why did he want her back? To be his scapegoat? To be the blame for his alcoholic weakness? To be an escape mechanism […]? But above all, to be the doormat upon which he could wipe his feet. Wasn't that what most black men wanted their women for? To take their anger at themselves and the world about them, hold their sperm, spew out their babies? This was what made them feel manly: the white man's underdog having an underdog too. (44)

Shockley's narration in this passage is problematic for a multiplicity of reasons: no differentiation, for instance, between her idiosyncrasies as author, the narrative voice, and protagonist's thought process exists. What this results in, then, is a series of authorial interjections and unsubstantiated generalizations about black men and women directly (and nationalism indirectly) that, left largely unmediated, resonates moreso as ideological realities

rather than stereotypes.[34] Notwithstanding these shortcomings, Shockley does something of substance: she contests the ways in which black women are largely conceived within the nationalist imaginary in intransigently narrow, myopic, and marginal terms---that is, as "scapegoats"; reproductive entities who produce the nation; and, objects upon which black men's resentment against the hegemonic and oppressive white power structure is displaced.

Renay, dismissing Jerome's plea for her to return home, refuses to reunite with him and chooses freely and deliberately to remain with Terry instead. Renay's conscious decision to maintain her interracial same-gender loving union with Terry serves two consequential purposes: first, it defamiliarizes nationalist and larger American societal fixations on intraracial bonding, racial "purity," and heterosexuality; and, secondly, and of equal if not greater import, it subverts nationalists' and the larger black community's homophobic and essentialist characterizations of homosexuality or same-sex desire as a non-black or, otherwise, "white thing".[35] This, Shockley achieves via

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[34] Refer to footnote 26.

[35] Kendell Thomas, "Ain't Nothin' Like the Real Thing: Black Masculinity, Gay Sexuality, and the Jargon of Authenticity," *The House That Race Built*, 126; and Rhonda Williams "Living at the Crossroads: Explorations in Race, Nationality, Sexuality, and Gender," *The House That Race Built*, 146, for scholarship that

three separate yet interlocking delineations of the ways in which members of the black community---black women in general, black nationalists, and Jerome Lee---respond toward homosexuality and same-gender loving within black contexts.

In terms of black women and their position on homosexuality, for instance, Renay---meditating on how her friend would respond to her living with Terry---asserts that black women, though receptive and "sympathetic" towards a plethora of issues, are largely unreceptive to lesbianism and same-gender loving:

> Black women were the most vehement about women loving each other. This kind of love was worse to them than the acts of adultery or incest, for it was homophile. It was worse than being inflicted with an incurable disease. Black women could be sympathetic about illegitimacy, raising the children of others, having affairs with married men---but not towards Lesbianism, which many blamed on white women. For her to be in love with a woman who was white *and* a Lesbian---[…] would never [be] understand[able]. (32)

Though hyperbolic and over-generalized, this passage articulates the ways in which black women, as a microcosm of the black community, conceive lesbianism and homosexuality within a pathologized context: that is, as a site of con-

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discusses nationalist articulations of homosexuality as both a sign of white decadence and ramification of white supremacy.

tamination and disrepair---similar to, yet "*worse*" than, "incest" or "an incurable disease"---and, equally problematic, as a sign of white "decadence". What this passage does, then, as Shockley intends, is mark both the complicated and vexed relationship between race and sexuality in the black lesbian (and gay) experience; contest the black community's narrow, dismissive, and heterosexist sensibilities regarding homosexuality and same-sex desire; and, of equal significance, destabilize heteronormative history and nationalist polemics that construct black lesbian and gay bodies as having been essentially and "purely" heterosexual until contaminated by encounters with white supremacy.[36]

In fact, Shockley further criticizes nationalist claims that homosexuality is a "white thing" and that its presence in the black community is the ramification of white decadence. When Renay, despite her reservations, goes on a double date with her best friend Fran and Fran's friend Lazarius, a black nationalist, they encounter a "slim twig of a young black man, wearing a blonde Beatle wig and dressed in tight red pants and [a] matching shirt" with "light powder and eyes shadowed with purple mascara" (153). When he bumps into their table and apologizes "in a high effeminate voice," both Fran and Lazarius respond in

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[36] Thomas, 123.

highly disparaging heterosexist, homophobic manners: Fran, for example, mutters a (sexually) derogatory term, while Lazarius asserts contemptuously that, "Somebody ought to take him out in the alley and beat the shit out of him" (153). Both remarks not only expose the deep-seated homophobia and intolerance for sexual difference in the black community, but also excoriate those individuals, like Lazarius, who view violence as a "corrective" for so-called black sexual deviancy.

Like Lazarius, Jerome is highly intolerant of individuals, especially black ones, who transgress established (hetero)sexual boundaries. Upon discovering, for instance, that Renay has left him, not for another black man but for a white lesbian, he confronts her derisively:

> "So! You're screwing around with bulldikers […]. You turning into a queer. […] Wait until I tell the court about your he-she friends. You won't get Denise or a goddam […] thing. […] The shitting-ass nerve of you, bringing my daughter up around bulldikers. […] I ought to stay right here and wait for her and then kill you both!" (127-130)

Jerome's remarks illustrate not only his extremely heterosexist and homophobic attitude, but also his intensely violent condemnation of homosexuality. Rather than accept same-gender loving within a black context, he articulates, instead, a willingness to resort to murder as an extreme

"panacea" for black sexual difference. In this case, Jerome, as the author intends, typifies the sexuality-based fears and hostilities of black nationalists and the black community at large, as well as their castigatory stance towards individuals whose "infractions" threaten established communal standards and cultural norms. Furthermore, Jerome's reaction---as well as his subsequent assertion that he will "whip the pure black shit out of [Renay's] yellow ass"---reflects his insecurities and inadequacies as a man. For, Renay's having left him in general, but for a woman, in particular, not only emasculates him but, far worse in his estimation, undermines his role as a man; for, within the nationalist project, women's sexuality is regulated through men who have orchestrated control over female bodies and sexuality.[37] Jerome's desire to beat Renay evidences, then, his need to recover both dominion over Renay and his "loss" manhood as well.

Renay, despite threats of a violent beating, refuses to capitulate to Jerome or subscribe to nationalist and larger societal proscriptions for women. Instead, she further de-legitimizes Jerome's function as a (black) man as

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[37] Mayer, 7.

she asserts herself unnervingly and responds to him resolutely:

> "Yes.... You want to beat me, to trample on me, see me grovel because you despise what you can't change. A man should be able to control his woman---especially a black man who can't control anything else. But do you really want to know why you hate me? Because I've survived your male deterioration. [...] Survived. Through the muck and slime you've [...] put me through, I've come out of it---our battle of wills. But, you, you're in it and can't get out because you're stuck!
>
> You're too weak to struggle. It's easier to stay in. And you can't stand the idea that I've left the dirt and you, and you can't push me back [...]. (131-132)

In her castigating and emasculatory remarks, Renay not only exerts her agency, but also her transcendent abilities in that she transgresses Jerome's patriarchal authority. For, Renay, now unencumbered by Jerome's misogynist and confining mandates or her heterosexist marriage with him, articulates her refusal to leave Terry and return to Jerome and "the dirt." In her "talking back," to borrow bell hooks' terminology, Renay denigrates Jerome in a language reverberative of nationalist discourse, which Jerome embodies, to illustrate the ways in which he, even by certain nationalist standards, does not meet the requirements for man-

hood.[38] To this end, then, Renay's "back talk" not only demonstrates her unwillingness to be "policed" by Jerome, nationalist and larger societal circumscriptions for women, but, of far greater import, signifies her evolvement and movement from objectivity to subjectivity---that is, from a largely un-autonomous being to an actualized, empowered, liberated self.

"could it be met in this form?": Shockley and the Ideological Subversion of Convention

In *Loving Her*, Shockley foregrounds and polemicizes same-gender loving, which functions as the primary idiom through which transgression is articulated and enacted in the novel. Through her characterization of Renay as engaged in an interracial same-sex relationship, Shockley not only castigates the ideological conflation of homosexuality and same-sex desire with non-blackness, but also subverts nationalist and societal constructions of womanhood, family, and nation. In her inscription of same-gender loving in a black context, then, Shockley disavows essentialist conceptualizations of "blackness" and problematizes illusive notions of a fixed or unitary black (heteronormative)

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[38] bell hooks, "Talking Back," *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End, 1989), 9.

identity. Certainly, this marks and differentiates Shockley's novel from most of its contemporaries.[39] Yet, instead "of dismissing *Loving Her* for its difference," argues Madhu Dubey, "it may be more illuminating to view this difference as an extreme narrative choice that sharply highlights […] ideological limits" and, thereby, "enables a clearer appreciation of the difficult relation between difference and representative blackness."[40] For, Shockley, rather than reify nationalist constructions of "black" identity and the black nation as singular or monolithic, critiques this framework and illustrates, instead, that the black community is an elaborate, dynamic interplay of socio-cultural, ideological, sexual and other differences.[41]

What Shockley's creation of an interracial same-sex union does also is not simply challenge convention, but revolt against nationalist and larger societal tendencies that privilege maleness and male authority at the expense of women. For, by producing a same-sex union marked with erotic desire, sexual fidelity, and commitment, Shockley

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[39] Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Plume, 1970) and *Sula* (New York: Plume, 1973); Louise Meriwether, *Daddy Was a Number Runner* (1970; New York: Feminist, 2002); Alice Walker, *Third Life of Grange Copeland* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970); and Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (1986; Boston: Beacon, 1975).

[40] Dubey, 153.

[41] Ibid.

threatens the hegemonic domain of both masculinity and heterosexuality in that she renders a relationship between women that is radically unregulated through men.[42] To this end, she not only destabilizes the very meaning of womanhood and manhood, especially within the context of nation, but also establishes another paradigm for female bodies that extends beyond their traditionally defined roles within the nation and society at large.

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[42] Mayer, 14. See also Yakini B. Kemp, "When Difference Is Not the Dilemma: The Black Woman Couple in African American Women's Fiction," *Arms Akimbo: Africana Women in Contemporary Literature*, eds. Janice Lee Liddell and Yakini Belinda Kemp (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1999), 87, where she asserts that lesbianism and same-sex desire, especially within the context of the black community, is conflated with "unbridled female sexuality" unregulated through men and, as such, is seen as threatening.

CHAPTER IV

THE DIALECTICS OF TRANSGRESSION AND BELONGING: INDIVIDUALITY AND SOCIO-COMMUNAL ACTIVISM IN ALICE WALKER'S *MERIDIAN*

because women are expected to keep silent about
their close escapes I will not keep silent
and if I am destroyed [...] someone will please
mark the spot
where I fall and know I could not live
silent [...]

No, I am finished with living
for what my mother believes
for what my brother and father defend
for what my lover elevates
for what my sister, blushing, denies or rushes
to embrace.

[...] I am happy to fight
all outside murderers
as I see I must.[1]

In Alice Walker's poem "On Stripping Bark from Myself," the female narratorial consciousness verbalizes the (historically) precarious relationship between women, voice, and familial/communal belonging. Locating revolutionary possibilities in breaking women's "expected" silences, the poem's narrator articulates a willingness to exert her voice and herself, even if this entails diverging from the sensibilities of her family and/or community. Rather than compromise her sense of self or surrender to

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[1] Excerpt from Alice Walker's "On Stripping Bark from Myself" in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Nellie Y. McKay, et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 2379.

restrictive and oppressive forces, the narrator asserts her unrestrained willingness to "fight" against "all outside murderers." Her potential engagements in contestatory acts, regardless of whether her "revolting" threatens her standing in her family and/or community, is what I find particularly engaging. For, it is this very motif---this dialectic of transgression and belonging with regard to (black) women, individuality and community---that permeates Alice Walker's 1976 novel *Meridian* and forms the basis of this chapter.

Like the poem's narrator, Meridian Hill, the novel's protagonist, confronts a similar tension between individuality and communal belonging: she struggles against socio-communal circumscriptions for (black) women, yet simultaneously plays a revolutionary activist role within the community/communities in which she operates. Meridian's ability to function in this mutually (co)operative manner differentiates her from characters (analyzed previously in this dissertation) like Sula and Renay, whose transgressive behaviors invariably dislocate or isolate them in/from their communities, and account for their apparent "outsider within" statuses in their communal locales.[2] For, unlike

both Sula and Renay, Meridian maintains a sense of what I refer to as "individual collectivism": that is, she celebrates her largely uncompromised individuality, transgressing the strictures imposed on womanhood, while concomitantly playing a participatory (activist) role within various communities. This chapter examines, then, the ways in which Meridian, in her "operative" duality, defy roles ascribed to women, while simultaneously occupying an (inter)active---rather than solitary, exclusionary, or nonexistent---position within her respective communities. More specifically, it analyzes how she, engaging in radical and transgressive behavior, negotiates the (seemingly) tensional relationship between black women's individuality, communal belonging, and racial uplift in a postmodern society.

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[2] I borrow Patricia Hill Collins' terminology "outsider within" as a way of explicating these characters' statuses within their respective communities. See Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1990; New York: Routledge, 2000).

Climbing As We Lift: The Nexus between Individual and Communal Liberation in Meridian

> "We cannot create community through a collectivism that negates the individual. To erode the personal is to disintegrate the social."[3]

In his essay "Of the Quest for Freedom as Community," informed by existential and Marxist ideologies, Robert Birt asserts that "community is cooperative self-creation, which requires self-creative freedom of its members. […] Individuality is neither denied nor given as atomic individualism. Real community must preserve the Other in his or her Otherness and uniqueness. It must leave room for one to be oneself."[4] Like Birt, Cornell West, in *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, distinguishes between individuality and individualism as they relate to community: "the norm of individuality," posits West, "reinforces the importance of community"; whereas, a "doctrinaire" individualism "denigrates the idea of commu-

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[3] Robert E. Birt, "Of the Quest for Freedom as Community," *The Quest for Community and Identity: Critical Essays in Africana Social Philosophy*, ed. Robert E. Birt (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 92.

[4] Ibid.

nity."[5] Similar in both Birt's and West's assertions is not only a differentiation between individuality and individualism, but also a characterization of individuality and community in non-oppositional manners that, without negating "uniqueness" or "otherness," illuminate the symbiosis and/or contingency between these entities.

While Birt's and West's conceptualizations are salient and insightful, what I would add is a consideration of the ways in which gender (and, to an extent, temporality and geography), in addition to race, compound to further complicate the very dynamics of community. For, as black feminist scholars have long argued, community is mediated by gender, geographical location, and other apparatuses within particular historical moments. Joy James, for instance, asserts in *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics*, that "Transcendent community remains more often the ideal than the reality" since, in some "states and societies, black women are subordinate Others. They exist as outsiders within not only American culture but also [...] African American cultures."[6] Much like James, Johnnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, in *Gender Talk:*

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[5] Cornell West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity.* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 17.

[6] Joy James, *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), 40.

The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities, explicate the ways in which race and gender, especially, collide and have historically been ignored in the name of racial/communal solidarity.[7] Such elisions of intraracial gender issues embrace neither "uniqueness" nor individuality and, thereby, essentialize community at the expense of "others"---namely women.

These issues surrounding community and individuality, and the deliberate or inadvertent (communal) suppressions they engender, especially where women are concerned, are what I find particularly intriguing---as they have larger implications relating directly to notions of women and belonging. At the heart of this matter, I would argue, is the very nature of community, with its largely nationalist (or nation-like) undercurrents, that demands unconditional or ineffable loyalty and solidarity as requisites for belonging. For, community---like "nation"---is, as Benedict Anderson contends, "imagined"; and, "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail," it is "always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."[8] One of the questions at hand, then, is what happens when indi-

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[7] Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities* (New York: Ballantine, 2003).

[8] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verson, 1983), 7.

viduals, in this case black women, transgress such communal "bonds," parameters, or solidarity? This critical question is, in part, what this chapter, foregrounding Alice Walker's *Meridian*, explores. For, it is precisely this communal/cultural dilemma---a largely but not exclusively postmodern condition---that Walker engages via her title character Meridian, who navigates the oftentimes vexed relationship between black women, individuality, and communal belonging.

Meridian, on multiple levels, defies communal proscriptions for women, or, again, what I refer to as the classical black female script, informed by Victorian ideologies of ideal womanhood---piety, sexual purity, submissiveness, and domesticity---and culturally specific tenets for women: racial loyalty and solidarity, sexual fidelity to black men, self-abnegation, and idealization of marriage and motherhood. While Meridian defies the principles concerning sexuality, selfhood, and motherhood, she reconciles this transgression---thereby enabling her to maintain her communal status---largely through her acts of racial/communal uplift and socio-communal activism in the Civil Rights Movement. Equally paramount to her contravention of communal sanctions, yet ability to maintain a participatory communal role, is her mobility and creation of

communal spaces, other than her "home" community, in which to operate. To this end, Meridian, in her operative duality or individual collectivism, expands unilateral conceptions of black womanhood and community, demonstrating that individuality and community need not exist as mutually exclusive entities in a postmodern society.

At various junctures, Meridian operates within, at minimum, three communities: her "old or "home" one; the academic community at Saxon College; and the activist one comprised of revolutionaries, like herself, and the townspeople she helps galvanize. Though varied, these communities provide little space for individuality to exist, let alone be cultivated. Notwithstanding, Meridian ekes out a uniquely nonconformist livelihood or singularity in each, regardless of the ramifications that might ensue. I will focus, however, on Meridian's home community, which creates the context for her transgressive behavior.

Meridian's home community, for instance, is a small segregated town in the rural South that upholds circumscriptions for women embedded in the female script. Her community's rigidly gendered proscriptions for sexual behavior reflect not so much a fixation on morality or moral

regulation but, rather, a larger concern with female socio-sexual behavior interrelated with notions of propriety and respectability. "Because gendered identities define and socialize individuals into unconscious moral senses of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour," as the authors assert in *Of Property and Propriety*, "they often become tied to ideals concerning propriety."[9] Such ideals regarding gender and appropriate (sexual) behavior are deeply entrenched in Meridian's community, where they translate into practices of dissemblance or a "politics of silence" surrounding female sexuality to which Meridian encounters and becomes "prey":

> [Meridian's] mother, father, aunts, friends, passers-by---not to mention her laughing sister---had told her nothing about what to expect from men, from sex. Her mother never used the word, and her lack of information on the subject of sex was accompanied by a seeming lack of concern about her daughter's morals. Having told her absolutely nothing, she had expected her to *do* nothing. […H]er mother only cautioned her to "be sweet." [Meridian] did not realize this was a euphemism for "Keep your panties up and your dress down," an expression she *had* heard and been puzzled by.[10]

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[9] Himani Bannerji, Shahrzad Mojab, and Judith Whitehead, eds. *Of Property and Propriety: The Role of Gender and Class in Imperialism and Nationalism* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2001), 4.

[10] Alice Walker, *Meridian* (New York: Pocket, 1976), 60. Subsequent references to this novel are cited parenthetically in the text.

The community, especially Meridian's mother Gertrude Hill, embraces the script's demand for female sexual purity and dissemblance, designed in part to safeguard black women from sexual violation. Yet, these familial/communal silences---embodied in misleading and easily misconstrued euphemisms such as "be sweet"---prove themselves ineffectual and, far worse, damaging. Rather than offer Meridian protection, this secrecy surrounding female sexual behavior attributes, paradoxically, to her vulnerability to male sexual violence: for, Meridian's first sexual encounters are, rather disconcertingly, acts of molestation she experiences repeatedly from a mortician and his assistant at a local funeral home. Meridian's early experiences with male sexual violation, and lack of security against such encounters, inform and influence her subsequent relationship to men---of whom she becomes afraid---and sexuality. For, she establishes a reactive protectionist stance---albeit it through sexually intimate relationships with men---as a conduit by which to secure a level of safety from (external) male sexual lust and aggression.

The rigidity surrounding female sexuality, and lack of candid non-euphemistic instructions on men and female sexuality, provide Meridian with no familial and/or communal

space in which to engage in dialogues on sex, let alone disclose within these contexts her experiences with male sexual misconduct. Her condition is, however, neither an isolated circumstance, nor is it one that should be trivialized as a fictional occurrence contained solely within a literary (con)text. For, Meridian's encounters have, I contend, far greater communal and cultural implications, as Paula Giddings' cogent polemic "The Last Taboo" helps explicate and illumine. Historicizing black sexual politics within a U.S. context, Giddings identifies "sociosexual conditions" that, because of an absence of "sex/gender discourses" in "our community," plague black women particularly and the larger black community generally; yet, "solutions" to such intra-racial issues "have not," she further argues, "been passed on through families or social institutions."[11] Giddings' assertions are remarkably fitting to Meridian, who, in the face of such circumstances---and unprotected by the script or familial/communal (re)solutions or interventions---, deliberately takes it upon herself to mediate her condition, rather than be victimized by male sexual misconduct. Interestingly enough, her mediation, a direct corollary of having been molested, comes via delib-

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[11] Paula Giddings, "The Last Taboo," *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New, 1995), 423, 425.

erate engagements in heterosexual relationships and sexual practices: for, she consciously seeks and engages in ostensibly committed relationships, and the sexual intimacy they entail, with men---her "boyfriends" or "lovers"---as protection against external male sexual lust or aggression.

Her relationship with Eddie, a boyfriend who later becomes her husband, is one such scenario. Not attracted to Eddie, and utterly disinterested in sex, she engages in a relationship with him nonetheless. What she desires in her strategic relationship with him, then, is not at all Eddie or sex but rather the protection, from other men and male sexual prerogatives, that being "his girl" signifies and provides her:

> Being with him did a number of things for her. Mainly it saved her from the strain of responding to other boys or even noting the whole category of Men. This was worth a great deal, because she was afraid of men---and was always afraid until she was taken under the wing of whoever wandered across her defenses to become---in a remarkably quick time---her lover. This, then, was […] what sex meant to her; not pleasure, but a sanctuary in which her mind was freed of any consideration for all the other males in the universe who might want anything of her. It was resting from pursuit. (61-62)

Meridian's engagement in committed relationships, requiring sex, with men as protection against unwanted (outside) male

sexual encounters further underscores the inefficacy and contradictions of the script and strictly gendered expectations concerning sexual behavior. Moreover, it reveals the ramifications of absent familial/communal discourses or interventions that might protect black women, like Meridian, from certain sex/gender systems. For, within a "sexually aggressive" context, as Paula Giddings avers, (young) black women who endure such sociosexual conditions have "sexual experiences […] not characterized by learning the meaning or enjoyment of sex, or even making choices about engaging in it, but in protecting themselves from what is viewed […] as the irrepressible sexual drives of the men in their lives."[12] This is, in part, the case with Meridian, who "while not enjoying [sex] at all, […] had had [it] as often as her lover [Eddie] wanted it, sometimes every single night" (60-61).

Yet, because she uses sex methodically as mediation, sex for Meridian has a certain duplicity and serves, then, a "dialogical" function: that is, it exemplifies a problematical acquiescence to male sexual desire and irrepressibility or, as Madhu Dubey asserts, a "submission to masculine pleasure"; and, it also, I would add, signifies a certain agency and resistance on Meridian's part, as she, via

[12] Giddings, 425.

her conscious and calculated efforts, utilizes sex as a "preventative" measure to regulate the terms of her sexual behavior.[13] For, as Carole S. Vance argues poignantly in "Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality," sexuality is complicated, as there is an ambiguous and complex relationship that exists between female pleasure and danger, empowerment and disempowerment:

> Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency. To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live.[14]

Vance's assertion helps illuminate the duality of Meridian's sexual behavior. Meridian's use of sex should not be read singularly, then, as her compliance with male sexual aggressiveness. Rather, her appropriation or "manipulation" of sex and its functions should be viewed also as evidence of her agency---since agency and resistance take many forms---and refusal to submit passively to male sexual

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[13] Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), 128.

[14] Carole S. Vance, "Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality," *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (1984; London: Pandora, 1992), 1.

prerogatives and/or the social and patriarchal systems from which they stem. For, she demonstrates her ability to navigate and regulate, on certain levels, the terms of her sexual behavior.

While Meridian's strategic use of sex, unlike dissemblance, proves seemingly effectual in safeguarding her from male sexual violation, it serves as no substitute for instructive dialogues on sex and its ramifications. She engages in sex methodically, though never fully cognizant of its consequences: and so, having had sex practically "every single night" for "almost two years," her "pregnancy came as a total shock" (61). Meridian's unexpected pregnancy is, much like her molestation, one of the damaging outcomes of an absence of familial/communal discourses on sexuality---or, at least any extending beyond her mother's nebulous euphemisms. For, "no adult, not even Mrs. Hill," as Barbara Christian asserts, "gives Meridian information about sex or the prevention of pregnancy---even as the mother knows the drastic changes that motherhood will impose on her daughter."[15] Meridian becomes "prey," then, to familial/communal secrets and silences surrounding female sexuality.

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[15] Barbara Christian, "An Angle of Seeing Motherhood," *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985; New York: Teachers, 1997), 240.

Meridian marries Eddie, who "had always promised he would 'if something went wrong'" (61). Yet, rather than acquiesce and ascribe to certain marital roles, particularly her sexual one as wife, she regulates, be it through elusion, the terms of their sex life. For, now married, and therefore within a union that sanctions sex, the very meaning and function of intercourse for Meridian change. Whereas it had served previously as a conduit by which to secure protection from external male advances, she, now as Eddie's wife, no longer contends with such threats---as marriage marks her "unavailable" to men besides her husband. Thus, no longer needing sex as mediation and uninterested in it, Meridian implements certain regulatory practices to curtail or altogether elude sex with Eddie. In addition to "locking" her legs to the point where Eddie must "fight to get [them] open," she relies on seemingly legitimate excuses to avoid sex: "she put the blame on any handy thing: her big stomach, the queasiness, the coming baby, [and] old wives' tales that forbade intercourse until three months after the baby was born" (65). In her deliberate and strategic avoidance of marital sex, Meridian circumvents, better yet transgresses, her sexual role as wife. In so doing, she refuses to privilege her husband's sexual desires or allow him to "possess" her and, thereby, dictate

her sexual behavior. Moreover, in her conscious use of her pregnancy---a direct repercussion or reproductive quality of sex---as pretext for avoidance, she exerts her agency and unwillingness to allow her husband to regulate the terms of her sexual behavior. To this end, she, via her elusory sexual practices, undermines the script and social proscriptions that contain and require female sexuality within marital domains.

Just as Meridian's methodical use of premarital sex had proven effectual with regards to male sexual violation, her strategic evasion of marital sex is equally efficacious in that it enables her to transgress her sexual role as wife. Her calculated efforts become, in fact, permanently effective in that they "relieve" her altogether from sex with Eddie who, not to Meridian's surprise, engages in an extramarital affair: and so, by the time the baby was born, Eddie had found another "woman who loved sex, and was able to get as much of it as he wanted every night" (65).

Meridian is, however, unmoved by Eddie's infidelity, as well as the subsequent collapse of their marriage, yet is perturbed by the fact that he leaves her with the sole responsibility of raising their son: for, Eddie had automatically "assumed […] the baby would remain with her," which, "was, after all, how such arrangements had *always*

gone"; he had no intentions of "see[ing] much more of either of them" (71-72). What Meridian resents more than anything, and eventually challenges, is the double standards or very gendered nature of parenthood: for, while Eddie, as a man, shirks fatherhood and his responsibilities with neither remorse nor repercussions, motherhood is imposed upon and expected of Meridian because she is a woman--a phenomenon Adrienne Rich delineates in *Of Woman Born*:

> The meaning of "fatherhood" remains tangential, elusive. To "father" a child suggests above all to beget, to provide the sperm which fertilizes the ovum. To "mother" a child implies a continuing presence […].
>
> A man may beget a child […], and then disappear; he need never see or consider child or mother again. Under such circumstances, the mother faces a range of painful, socially weighted choices: abortion, suicide, abandonment of the child, infanticide, [or] the rearing of [the] child […].[16]

Both historically and cross-culturally, women have been defined by motherhood, an identity that has been largely forced upon them, while no such impositions exist for the "childless man" or absent/non-father. What Meridian encounters and reacts to, then, is both the gendered and sexist ideologies undergirding parenthood: thus, while Eddie "fathers" a child and has the liberty to abandon him with-

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[16] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton 1976), 13.

out contemplation or stigmatization, Meridian's responsibility as a woman is to fulfill her so-called maternal role of mother as it has been constructed within patriarchal society.

Despite these constructs, Meridian, via her interactions with her son, disrupts certain fixed ideals regarding motherhood, and all it entails, in that she neither possesses nor demonstrates any "maternal" affinities towards him. For, instead of responding to her son Eddie Jr. with unconditional love or affection mothers are expected to exude, she equates him and mothering within enslavement:

> It took everything she had to tend to the child, and she had to do it, her body prompted her not by her own desires, but by her son's cries. So this, she mumbled […] is what slavery is like. Rebelling, she began to dream each night, just before her baby sent out his cries, of ways to murder him. […He] did not feel like anything to her but a ball and chain.
>
> The thought of murdering her own child eventually frightened her. To suppress it she conceived, quite consciously, methods of killing herself. (69-70)

Meridian does not experience the presumably inherent maternal bliss that society associates with motherhood. Rather, she views motherhood and her son moreso as burdens than sources of joy or fulfillment meriting idealization. In her evocation of slavery, and particularly her equating

motherhood with it, Meridian articulates feelings of entrapment and enclosure that society very rarely, if ever, attaches to motherhood. To this end, Meridian perceives motherhood as a hindrance---an institution alienating her from and incarcerating her within herself---that corrupts her potential. Thus, as a panacea, she, contradictory to both the script and societal expectations of mothers, conjures thoughts of infanticide and suicide as mechanisms of escape from what she considers thralldom: unexpected and unwanted motherhood. In this regard, Meridian demystifies society's largely narrow and myopic conceptualizations of the mother role.

Moreover, in her allusion to slavery, Meridian problematizes universal notions regarding motherhood, such as those advanced by Rich, that are, in Meridian's case, further complicated by race and the historical relationship or nexus between black women and motherhood. For, given (enslaved) black women's largely restricted/denied access to or "ownership" of their children---who, like adult slaves, were commodified and sold as chattel---motherhood within a black context embodies an entirely other set of complex meanings beyond the universal.[17] Black motherhood and "the

black mother" emblematizes something, both real and mystical, to be revered and idealized. Notwithstanding the historical significance undergirding black motherhood, Meridian chooses both freely and deliberately to give her son away---which "she did […] with a light heart---rather than kill him or herself. In so doing, she deviates from the "tradition" of black motherhood, which, on certain levels, conflicts her:

> Meridian knew that enslaved women had been made miserable by the sale of their children, that they had laid down their lives, gladly, for their children, that the daughters of these enslaved women had thought their greatest blessings from "Freedom" was that it meant they could keep their own children. And what had Meridian Hill done with *her* precious child? She had given him away. She thought of […] herself as belonging to an unworthy minority, for which there was no precedent and of which she was, as far as she knew, the only member. (91)

Having internalized ideologies concerning black motherhood, Meridian is, despite this history, unable to serve the role of mother she has been socialized to fulfill. For, unlike her "maternal" ancestors who had, for the most part,

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[17] Barbara Christian asserts that, "The concept of motherhood is of central importance in both the philosophy of African and Afro-American peoples […]; it is related to the historical process within which these peoples have been engaged, a process that is an intertwining of tradition, enslavement, and the struggle for their peoples' freedom." See Christian's "An Angle of Seeing," *Black Feminist Criticism*, 213.

equated the opportunity to keep their children with "freedom," Meridian views slavery and motherhood---specifically raising an unexpected and unwanted child---as comparable institutions. In her highly contestatory act---her giving away Eddie Jr.---Meridian both upholds and diverges from "ideal" black motherhood: for, she exercises her right to protect her baby---"believing she had saved [his] life" (91)---by giving him away; yet, conversely, she dissociates herself from the tradition, both actual and mythical, of black motherhood by abandoning her child.[18]

Meridian's decision is, however, not met without reproof. Her mother, who emblematizes the community and tradition, admonishes her for considering the possibility of abandoning her son: "'I don't see how you could let another woman raise your child […]. It's just selfishness. You ought to hang your head in shame. I have six children […] though I never wanted to have any, and I have raised every one myself'" (90). Despite Mrs. Hill's own nebulous relationship to motherhood---and her having fantasized about suicide after unwanted pregnancies made her forfeit the "possibilities of her life"---she excoriates Meridian for

[18] This notion of "ideal" black womanhood---black women protecting their children so that they might live---is also complicated by historical accounts of slave women who took their children's lives as emancipatory acts to save them from the institution of slavery.

what she considers a "sin" against black motherhood. Rather than acknowledge and challenge the ways in which motherhood, both as an institution and identity, is historically and systematically imposed on women like Meridian, Mrs. Hill, who embodies the community, upholds its rigid doctrines concerning womanhood and motherhood instead.

Abandoning Eddie Jr. is for Meridian far from a simple task; her decision is informed largely by her desire to participate in the Movement and attend college, an opportunity afforded her because of her scholastic capacity and activism in the Movement. Though she helps liberate her community via socio-political activism and uplift, her decision to give away her child is, nonetheless, met with resistance and condemnation from her mother.

Thus, despite the arguable legitimacy of Meridian's decision, she does not fully reconcile her divergence from convention and black motherhood. For, regardless of her rationale behind or justification for her actions, she experiences what Adrienne Rich describes as the "irreversible changes" that affect her body and mind, which "will never be the same"; for, her "future as a woman has been shaped

by" her choice to abandon her child.[19] To this end, Meridian experience a cumulative sense of guilt, which manifests itself in the form of a "voice that cursed her existence" for not having lived "up to the standard of motherhood that had gone before" her (91-92).

While Meridian never fully reconciles her guilt, she avoids communal ramifications or responses that her perceived transgression against motherhood would otherwise elicit. For, Meridian challenges socio-communal demands that women experience motherhood unambivalently and, in so doing, is seen as deviant. Yet, what "redeems" her is her participatory role in the Movement, which, as a form of socio-political activism and uplift, serves as expiation for her so-called transgression. For, it is precisely her activism and commitment to liberatory politics that enable her to transgress circumscriptions for women, yet, concomitantly, serve a vital role within multiple communities. In fact, Walker deliberately employs this narrative strategy---characterizing, or more specifically historicizing Meridian within the context of the Movement---to negotiate and problematize notions regarding black women, individuality, and community.

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[19] Rich, 12.

It is, in fact, not coincidental that Meridian's transgressions against motherhood, her thoughts of infanticide in particular, are accompanied invariably by moments of socio-political consciousness or activism on her part. Two such instances of this is, for example, when her initial fantasies of murdering Eddie Jr. are interrupted by a voter registration demonstration, led by young black activists, she sees on the evening news. Not only does this disrupt her thoughts of infanticide, but also radicalizes and introduces her to the Movement and black struggles for equal rights and both civic and political subjectivity. Similarly, "after the bombing," Meridian volunteers at a local Movement office before she becomes actively involved in protest, demonstrations, and Freedom marches. Because of her unusually high IQ and activist work, she is offered a scholarship to Saxon College, where young mothers, like herself, would otherwise not be accepted. Her opportunity to attend Saxon, which would allow her to also become active in the Atlanta movement, informs her decision to give her son away. In this regard, Meridian's dedication to uplift and black liberatory struggles supercedes and reconciles her abandonment of Eddie Jr. and her role as mother. In abandoning her child to serve a vital activist role in various communities, Meridian not only challenges restric-

tions placed on women, but also, as Barbara Christian maintains, expands limited and myopic definitions of "mother": for, Meridian goes beyond "society's narrow meaning of the word *mother* as a physical state and expand its meaning to those who create, nurture, and save life in social and psychological as well as physical terms."[20]

[20] Christian, 242.

CONCLUSION: MAY THE CIRCLE BE (UN)BROKEN

"Disrupting Dissemblance" is, in several capacities, an integrative project---a juncture in which black women's fiction, movement ideologies, and the politics of representation and identity converge, providing an interdisciplinary discursive framework. The significance of this dissertation lies, in fact, in its examination of the intersectionality of not only race, gender, and sexuality---signifiers more commonly examined in black feminist analyses---but, equally important, of literature and the political movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. For, while previous scholarship has analyzed the nexus between literature and political movements, the majority of this research is of a non-literary nature and, thereby, provides inadequate insight into the ways in which black women's fiction and political movements intersect. This dissertation is, then, a literary location in which these largely understudied yet interlocking dynamics meet with greater clarity and transparency.

In its foregrounding of sexuality as a trope, this dissertation has explicated the ways in which dissemblance, as it relates to black women, sexuality, and community, informs and is resisted in post-sixties black women's fiction. Through an examination of a panorama of transgres-

sive black women characters, this study illuminates the various means by which selected post-sixties black women writers challenge socio-communal circumscriptions ascribed to black women. In this regard, then, "Disrupting Dissemblance" treats gender, in conjunction with race and sexuality, as not merely abstract but operative issues within a black communal setting. And, of equal import, it incorporates the nationalist paradigm as a way of discussing gender as not just (gender) bias but, rather, in relation to nationalism and other ideological constructs and apparatuses---discourses of "whiteness" and ideal womanhood---that must be addressed. Reading these characters within this context as "transgressive"---as deliberately and unapologetically defiant of communal sanctions and proscriptive definitions of "woman" and "normativity"---distinguishes them from simply being "wild" or misbehaving as an anomaly; it situates them within a communal tradition.

This dissertation has explicated novels that foreground black women characters who transgress in both similar and dissimilar ways in order to reveal a range of transgressive behavior. Chapter Two, for instance, examined the ways in which the protagonist Sula Peace defies all the tenets of the classical black female script, com-

pletely disregarding its and the Bottom community's strictures. Chapter Three analyzed Renay Davis, who, in engaging in an interracial same-gender loving relationship, transgresses myopic definitions of womanhood, family, and "nation"---ultimately complicating and expanding our epistemologies regarding "blackness" and sexuality. And, Chapter Four examined Meridian Hill, who, unlike both Sula and Renay, transgresses circumscriptions for women, while playing a participatory activist role within various communities. Exploring these characters illustrates the ways transgressive behavior varies and, as is the case especially with Meridian, how black women's individuality and community need not exist as mutually exclusive entities within a postmodern society.

It is imperative to reiterate, then, that these characters should not be read as "positive role models" or transparent transcriptions of reality. Rather, it is, perhaps, more illuminating to view these transgressive black women as narrative strategies---deliberate characterizations on the authors' parts---to challenge and subvert ideologies regarding race, gender, and sexuality within a particular historical juncture. Thus, while these characters and their actions may, at times, be read as somewhat "ex-

treme," they are no more extreme than the politics, discourses, and ideologies against which they are working.

This study has focused on black women characters who transgress, namely, in a socio-sexual manner, and has analyzed novels written during a particular socio-historical and political moment. Future scholarship might explore the continuum of transgressive behavior within other larger (trans)historical and literary contexts. For, it would be both engaging and illuminating for future studies to examine transgressive black women characters during various historical junctures and literary genres.

To some degree, the subtitle "May the Circle Be (Un)Broken," as does this dissertation, conveys the need for the "breaking" of a tradition that perpetuates myopic and stereotypical representations of black women within confining social and ideological constructs. And, it necessitates or calls for, as well, an "unbroken circle" of scholarship that---with new thought, insight, and critical approaches---interrogates black women's fiction within intersectional and integrative frameworks. For, unlike the multi-layered meaning and ambivalence of this conclusion's title, there is no such ambiguity in our need for future projects, like this one, that examine the obvious and in-

conspicuous, explored and uncharted annals, trajectories, and dynamics of black women's fiction.

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